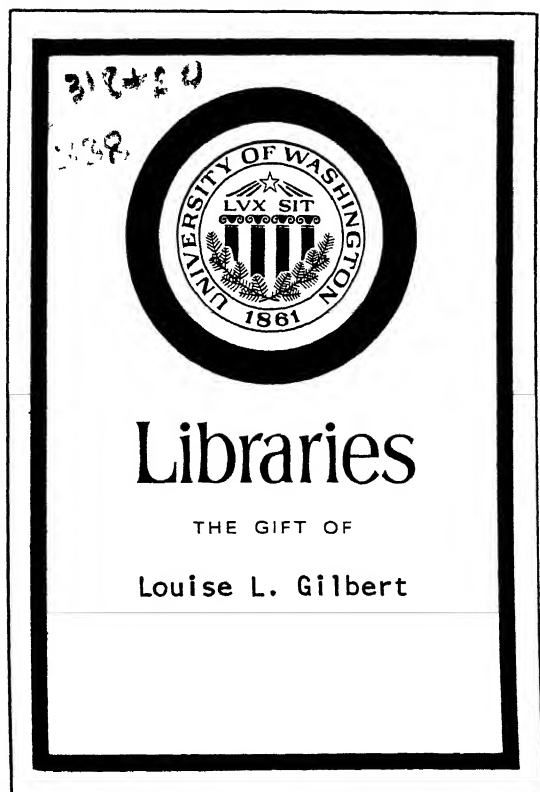


SARAH MANDRAKE



By MAGGIE-OWEN WADELTON

The Book of Maggie Owen

Maggie No Doubt

SARAH MANDRAKE



by

Maggie-Owen Wadelton

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DEDICATION

To all good soldiering men and true, I dedicate this book. And in particular, to one with whom it was my great good fortune to spend long and lovely years, my husband, Colonel Thomas Wadelton, who did not tarry for its printing. And to his son Tommy, on whose arm the darkling stripe of a private first class shone in his father's eyes with greater luster than ever did the glittering ornaments on his own shoulders.

MAGGIE-OWEN WADELTON

“From the threshold of this house I set forth on a journey which endured for fifty years, and now having returned to it I shall set forth no more, but for a little live within its quiet walls and thereafter for a very long time indeed—be dead.”

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PROLOGUE

A BRAZEN SUN wandered across the afternoon sky and, dropping into dark pockets of hills beyond the river, with its last rays burnished the copper leads and diamond-paned windows of a sturdy old house standing foursquare to the west, a friendly house whose painted yellow brick blended beautifully with the soft green of maple and beech and harsher tones of spruce in the wood topping a rise of ground to the north.

Stretching eastward beyond the house, green pasturage and fields of summer-ripened grain were marked into squares and oblongs by the crisscross of weather-beaten snake fencing, and where fields ceased an orchard stretched in diminishing rows as far as the eye could see. From a highway to the south a wide lane twisted leisurely through a growth of gnarled oak to end at a graveled driveway circling the house. Thence a crazy stone terrace, fully five hundred feet long and a fourth that distance in breadth, extended to a cliff high above the river, a terrace so huge and fantastic only the heart of a dreamer or a fool could have conceived it. On either side it was shaded by a row of tall, mottled-trunked birches, their dentate leaves forever whispering in the river wind. Beyond them broad green lawns stenciled by Victorian beds of old-fashioned flowers swept north and south, and over house and lawn, terrace and somber wood lay the toneless hush of a sweet midsummer day.

On the terrace above the cliff gaily colored lounge chairs were grouped together. On one of them sprawled a man wryly regarding a leg fully an inch shorter than its fellow stretched on the cushion before him. His swarthy skin, dark eyes and hair might well mark him a Latin, but there was no Latin blood in this erstwhile British

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flier, veteran of raid and combat who ironically enough had come to grief on the solid pavements of London Town. Even more pitiful than a broken bird striving to regain familiar and wind-swept sky, is a flying man forever earth-bound.

Sitting well forward on the chair beside him was a girl whose face, browned by wind and weather, made startling and lovely contrast to translucent blue eyes and hair with the sheen of shimmering sun-ripened grain. Her thin arms were wrapped about thin shanks, her chin rested on updrawn knees and her wide mouth was twisted into a grin as she watched an incredible procession moving forward from the house. It was led by a man whose height was well above six feet, and whose girth was altogether grotesque, the huge body bulking between neck and ankle having for all the world the appearance of a rocking toy needing only a finger touch to set it in motion. And, most astonishing in the war-stripped year of 1944, he was dressed in the ultraconventional garb of ultraconventional butlers. A coat, neither frock or dress but a discreet mingling of both, was held by a decorous button over his rotund belly, an expanse of glossy linen covered his wide chest, a doughty collar upheld his many chins, trousers in a pristine crease hung above cloth-topped shiny shoes, and in keeping with his superlative assembly the man's face bore the blank expression peculiar to his craft. But otherwise semblance to correct butlerdom was not.

With her tiny head cuddled among the creases of his neck, the man carried a baby girl and held by the hand a little boy who wrecked dignified progress by leaping from stone to stone the terrace length. Behind the trio a waspish woman trundled an immense tea cart, ignoring as well as might be three spaniels yapping at her heels. Their triplicate leash was held by a man whose peg leg beat an uneven tattoo on the stones and who, lowering himself to the cliff, dangled limbs, flesh and wood, over the edge and immediately began tossing a tooth-scarred ball to the spaniels, ever and again rewarding them with dusty tidbits from the pockets of his unbuttoned vest.

The huge man freed the hand of the little boy and gave the baby into its mother's arms. Then he set about his dignified affairs and in due course with decorum served tea to the adults. At a low table the waspish woman guided the little girl's spoon between mouth and bowl, and with pursed lips and lifted brow cautioned the boy against the ascendancy of fingers over fork, too full mouth, perilously

tipped glass and other matters troubling to young gentlemen of six or thereabouts.

The summer evening wrapped the terrace in a blanket of contentment. The girl leaning her head against the pillows of her chair flashed a gamin grin toward the man beside her and said staunchly, "I do *not* believe it," and he murmured, "Neither do I."

It was their particular and oft-repeated banter and hitherto had gone unnoticed, but today the huge butler, turning toward his mistress, inquired with solemnity, "Did Madam address me?" For a moment the girl stared at him, and then rolling her head on the chair cushions laughed until the tears swam beneath her lids.

Reaching out she grasped the man's fat hand and held it between her own. "I'm sorry, Peter," she said. "I wasn't, of course, laughing at you. I was really laughing at myself. You see, I never think of you as anything but just Peter, and when you persist in being very much Peter-the-butler it rather catches me off guard."

Without the flicker of an eyelash or the least facial expression Peter beamed, an accomplishment peculiar to him alone.

For a little the silence was broken only by the sound of the lapping river, and then, still clinging to the fat hand, the girl said musingly: "No, I did not address you, Peter, but I shall now if you don't mind. I meant, there are times when I cannot possibly believe that Mandrake exists or that you exist either." At the man's obvious bewilderment she added hastily, "It seems merely a grand, a gorgeous dream that I am at Mandrake House and Stephen also, and the babies; that you are here, Peter, and Ellen and Jacob, that Mandrake is tranquil and at peace, that I'm only dreaming our incredible luck. Maybe I'll waken to the frightful racket of bombs, the screams of incendiary cart and ambulance, and I'll tremble and grit my teeth while I fumble young Stephen into his blanket and go along quickly to the shelter to cower among people whose terror is all too visible. I'll make games for Stephen to keep him unafraid and happy, and all of the while I'll be seething with dread lest his father be up harrying the Jerries. Or maybe I'll waken in chill fear to listen to snarling dogs I cannot see, to the tread of invisible feet, to unearthly screams and laughter. I cannot believe all my terrors lie behind me, Peter. Do you suppose I ever shall?"

"I'm sure you will, Madam," said Peter, and with a gesture of respect which in anyone else would have been exaggerated, even

grotesque, laid the girl's hand on the arm of her chair and set about clearing away the remains of tea and supper.

The summer day fled slowly. Window by window the house awakened, its lights etching square golden patterns on lawns and terrace. Overhead a shy star flickered, and another and another, and from below the cliffs river boats added their mournful voices to the sounds of gathering night, the lights at their mastheads gleaming like fairy torches in the dusk.

With murmured words, the waspish woman lifted the little girl into Peter's arms, and the little boy also cuddled his sleepy head against the huge fat neck. Then she sedately trundled the tea cart toward the house door. When it had closed behind them the peg-leg man arose agilely and, having slipped the leash on his impatient golden dogs, said laconically, "Good night, folks," and went whistling down the lane. Softly dusk blurred the day's sharp outline, and the terrace under its shadowing birches was serene and lovely with twilight.

The girl, turning her eyes toward the lighted house, said pensively, "What a lonely and dreadful way to die, Stephen! Almost it does not bear thinking of."

And the man answered, "I'm not at all sure it was either dreadful or lonely, my dear. The conditions of her death were of her own choosing, and it must have been vastly satisfying for her to know the plan she had so carefully conceived in the major portion at least was successful. And as for her loneliness, you must consider Ellen's devotion and Peter's. Few people are fortunate enough to have such devotion bestowed upon them. Indeed very few could be made to believe it exists."

"It's almost impossible to consider that twittery Ellen and our dear, bland Peter were capable of carrying on such gigantic deception."

"Ellen's duplicity was somewhat astonishing for a time at least, but as for dear, bland Peter, I can well imagine him as part and parcel of any condition of life, except perhaps as a *coryphée de ballet*."

Above their laughter came the tones of a brassy gong and the bulk that was Peter stood outlined against the lighted doorway. The man in the lounge chair said musingly, "Do you suppose anywhere else on this troubled earth a superlative butler rings a superlative bell to

summon one to a superlative dinner?" Then he arose and drew the girl to her feet. Together they stood looking about them, at the dusky wood, at fireflies hovering over the garden, at the river silvery in twilight, at somber hills beyond, at Mandrake House, serene and lovely beneath the evening sky.

Turning toward the dormers crowning the roof, the man gave them a gay salute and said softly, "Cheerio, Sarah, thanks a million. May your rest be very sweet!" and drawing the girl into the crook of his arm began a halting journey toward the waiting house.



CHAPTER ONE

SINCE coming to Mandrake I have sought to set down faithfully its various and uncommon happenings, not, God knows, that I am addicted to journal-keeping, which to my mind is one of the most fatuous pursuits in which a man might engage, but for a reason which in the beginning was obscured from me, but which I now find God-sent in writing the incredible story of Mandrake and its people.

Perhaps it is fitting that I make beginning by telling of my own somewhat remote connection with the Mandrake family and my condition of life prior to the year 1942. I am Stephen Ellers and to this have legally added the name of Mandrake at behest of Madam Sarah Mandrake whose fortune I have so astonishingly inherited, and therefore for the remainder of life I shall go known as Stephen Ellers-Mandrake. I am British born and bred, the son of John Ellers and Barbara Lock, grandson of Frederick Ellers and his American wife Betsy Van Etten, whose mother, my great-grandmother, born Sarah Mandrake, linked the Ellers family to Mandrake House. I do not at all remember John Ellers, my father, for he did not return from the First World War, but hearing constantly he had died a soldier's death caused me to associate him with the soldier Michael who in casque and armour forever dwelt in the bright glass of an Ellersly church window.

Almost from infancy with my mother I dwelt at Ellersly Hall in Kentish England, the home of my grandsire, and of him also I have but scant remembrance, the most poignant being not as a living man but the invisible leader of a sombre cortège winding its dismal way from the Hall to Ellersly churchyard, a cortège however which for me

held the same exciting and mysterious fascination as the Punch and Judy show held yearly on the village common, excitement which must be held in check, for I had been warned under pain of dire punishment by our dour Kentish nurse to see to it my conduct be in keeping with the dark garments into which my small protesting person had been thrust. But riding for the first time in the grandeur of a darkling funeral coach I could scarce recall the oft-repeated and many instructions given me, to sit quietly between my sombre-clad mother and grandmother, to refrain from comment on crape dangling from the coachman's hat and knotted about his whip, not to peer forwards at the coffin carriage, nor backwards at men and women walking in silent procession behind our coach, men and women who all the days of their lives had earned roof and keep from their labours at Ellersly Hall and on Ellersly land, and who now and in their own fashion paid compliment and respect to Ellersly dead.

Perhaps I was five years old at the time of my grandfather's passing, six at uttermost, far and away too young to realize its significance to or bearing upon my life. After death duties had been paid only a minute portion of the Ellers fortune remained. Nevertheless my grandmother continued to maintain Ellersly Hall in its usual fashion and so depleted the family coffers that upon her death there could be no question of retaining the estate, supposedly my inheritance from sire and grandsire. Ellersly Hall and all of its lands were sold. And after the Crown had been satisfied there remained but a scant few thousand pounds.

Nevertheless had such sum been given into the keeping of one schooled in the handling of money it might well have been made to do until my education had been completed and I was a bit better equipped to earn my own living and that of my mother. But to one who never in her life had been denied a single whim, it vanished as mist before sun, and definitely Cambridge, alma mater of Ellers men for many a generation, was not for me.

Indeed I do not know how we would have managed to exist at all had not my mother received a mysterious and most unexpected sum of money from the estate of a long-defunct relative in the States which sufficed until I was in a position to set hand to plough and make an attempt at winning our bread and very possibly our butter. I was eighteen years old at the time and though the money was not at all sufficient to finance my further education, I did not feel deprived, for

God knows I have never been of scholarly turn of mind. From the hour I first beheld the huge planes soaring above our roof, bound for Channel crossing, they had been my chief interest and delight, and so when it became necessary for me to bestir myself and earn a living I turned instinctively and very gladly to the business of flying and thereafter served impatient earth-bound apprenticeship. The British training of pre-war pilots was slow and thorough and my twenty-first birthday was well upon me before I at last rode the Channel planes, and then only as co-pilot. Somewhat wryly I concede the brief training now given flying men by the R.A.F. has been proved entirely adequate and I do not doubt such training equals or even surpasses that which required two long years of my life to accomplish. From 1937 until 1939 I was a commercial pilot, and I am quite sure in all of Britain there was no happier lad than I. For not only was I engaged in a well-loved task, but my remuneration was such I was able to indulge my mother in whims and fancies all too long denied her.

In the very beginning of the Second World War numbers of commercial pilots were at once transferred to the British Flying Corps and I was among the lot. I wish I might write that I was pleased with the transfer but in all truth I was not. To fly freely among the clouds paced only by flying gulls was one thing; to zoom aloft to kill or be killed was quite another. At heart I was no killer and to send an enemy plane plummeting to earth brought a sense of triumph only until I remembered that, while the world was happily rid of a few more supermen, in their homeland were those who, loving them, would mourn and be bereft. I did not like combat nor do I like recalling it now. Nevertheless with all my might and main I served England as well as ever I could, and would so serve her again were grace given me to do so, but God grant her need of flying men will soon be done!

War was no more than a pup when I wed Kate Ferguson, a lady to whom I considered myself bound since the day I peered into a cradle and beheld a babe so tiny it stirred my three-year-old heart into a fury of devotion, and immediately, as well as a somewhat limited vocabulary would permit, I declared myself her lover and champion. My intense affection was a matter of jest to my elders and I regret to say, as the years marched, somewhat of an irritation to the young lady herself. Nevertheless her champion and lover I remained and, God willing, shall ever remain. In time the object of my affec-

tion grew into a fascinating miss with a brave galaxy of beaux and I, struggling to make a living, seemed last horse in the race. But upon my transfer to the British Flying Corps, Kate Ferguson travelled halfway across England, and though she would now vehemently deny such a thing, brazenly proposed marriage to me. And so we were wed, and within a twelvemonth young Stephen saw light of day.

I shall not attempt to write of the blitz of London. Doubtless accredited historians shall attend to its recording. But the blitz was the reason my mother, Kate and her infant fled the city, taking residence in a cottage in Surrey. Well after midyear of 1942 a much-needed leave had been given me, and I was joyously en route to my family when I was overtaken by misfortune in guise of a brewer's cask. Why I broke my journey in London I do not know, nor in the few hours I remained there do I know what prompted me to walk Ludgate Hill, for I had neither pleasure nor business in the vicinity. But walk it I did, and when an alert sounded scampered to shelter as hastily as others about me. Midway up the hill a drayer was unloading casks before a pub, the dray facing the footwalk and the horses turned at abrupt angle uphill. No more than a hundred yards beyond the pub a bomb struck and horses, dray and casks zoomed into the ether and the casks, again striking earth, cascaded crazily down the gradient, felling right and left the unfortunates not agile enough to get out of the way.

I was among those felled and thereafter found myself with such injury done to spine and thigh I feared I would never again set walking foot to earth. The irony of it! A seasoned veteran of air struck down by a runaway brewer's cask.

For endless time I lay growling futilely in a mid-London hospital but in time this also was bombed, and with the still-living patients I was removed to a nursing home, hastily transformed from a private mansion, on the lower road between Richmond and Kingston, no more than a goodish walk from the dwelling of my family. Perhaps this was unfortunate. In London it was impossible for Kate or my mother to visit me more frequently than once or twice a fortnight. Between their visits I might forget the dire predicament in which I found myself, but at the nursing home they were daily reminders that perhaps forever I would be to them a most inadequate staff, if indeed I did not become an altogether helpless burden. Throughout the autumn I lay helplessly bed-bound and it was only after numberless

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operations and sizable bone-grafting that I had begun to mend. But even with this bit of good done me I was vastly depressed, well knowing my flying days were past, and try as I would I could think of no other means by which I might earn a living for my family.

It was in the midst of such bleakness of spirit that I received a most astonishing cable, forwarded me by the solicitor who had charge of the financial well-being of Ellersly Estate. It was a lengthy affair purporting to have been sent by an American attorney representing a person who in life had borne the name of Sarah Mandrake, and it requested knowledge as to my ability to journey to the States for the purpose of discussing a legacy supposedly bequeathed me by said Sarah Mandrake.

With vastly muddled mind I brooded over the silly bit of paper but at last thrust it angrily into my wallet, for, recalling certain blithesome young Yanks who had served with our squadron and who had since been invalided home, I decided the cable was one of their everlasting and unwittingly gruesome pranks. Nevertheless, in days which followed I read and re-read the damned paper a thousand times. I had been given to understand the Mandrake family was entirely extinct and certainly I had never in my life heard of a person named Sarah Mandrake, save my great-grandmother who had been very dead well over a half-century. Nor without revealing the cable's contents could I seek needed knowledge from my mother. Both she and Kate were troubled regarding the precarious condition of our finances. Therefore to tell I had inherited a fortune and, if the cable turned out to be a sorry hoax, snatch such pleasant hope from them, seemed needlessly cruel. Lest I be fair game for the hoaxers, stupidly I admit I made no reply to the cable or even attempted contact with the Ellersly solicitor, but night and day the lovely insinuations of the message filled my mind.

Before I went quite mad the solicitor in person arrived at my bedside and when he had departed I was convinced that for my unworthy self God had wrought one of his mighty miracles, for I had been presented with a banker's cheque for such incredible sum that upon privately scanning the numerals I fainted and Kate, coming for her daily visit, found me stark and cold among the bed-covers, the cheque reposing on my breast in the fashion of a lily ornamenting that of a defunct virgin. Of the babbling incoherent days which followed I had but scant memory, but the Lord's turning of water

to wine or His healing of lepers seemed insignificant miracles as compared with that which He had wrought for Stephen Ellers, his wife, his mother and his son.

There were of course many difficulties attending war-time transportation of a well-crippled man, a child and a young woman so glowingly excited she was of no use to anyone, but magically such difficulties vanished. Officials of both British and American governments, who, I am sure, never before in their lives knew of our existence, so concerned themselves that well before Yuletide (my mother having elected to remain in England) Kate, young Stephen and I were en route via plane to Lisbon and from thence by clipper ship to the port of New York. In mid-December the huge flying craft lowered ice-encrusted wings over La Guardia Field and immediately we were engulfed by what to us seemed the fantastic abundance of the United States.

In time I waited on the American attorney, by name Benjamin Froste, and from him received complete details of Sarah Mandrake's odd will, and shortly indeed without prompting I could recite word and letter the terms of my amazing legacy. At my convenience I was to proceed to Mandrake Estate and there dwell for three-fourths of the year. At the end of such time I was legally to add the name of Mandrake to my own and institute procedure to become a citizen of the United States and thereafter reside continuously at Mandrake House for seven of each twelvemonths. If I accepted the terms of the will, Mandrake and a wholly incredible income would be mine and my children's after me. If I refused, the estate would revert to an unknown secondary heir. There were further and intricate details having to do with various other legacies and bequests, but to me, homeless, crippled and wholly without fortune, the will seemed to have been written by the angels themselves. With good heart and eager hand I set hand and seal to its many requirements, and at once certain moneys were given into my keeping to be distributed to other legatees personally and at designated periods. To this also I gave solemn and legal promise.

I was anxious to behold Mandrake, but both limb and spine began giving trouble and no sooner was the business of Sarah Mandrake's estate done with when I entered a hospital in New York so luxurious the further healing of my poor bones seemed incidental. Nevertheless when spring came, with no more assistance than a small body brace

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and a stout stick, I sauntered with Kate through the corridors of a vast caravanserai where, under the protection of the attorney Benjamin Froste and his wife Jennifer, Kate had bided the winter—a caravanserai so utterly magnificent that with young Stephen I shared the idea it must surely be the outer chamber of Paradise.

It was on May Day we first laid eyes on Mandrake House, and never as long as life shall last will we forget our first glimpse. We had come a long and lonely journey from our cradle-land and though it was "Merrie England" no longer in its time of travail, we loved it no less than in its days of quiet peace. Throughout the months we had dwelt in the States, despite unusual comfort and luxury, we were heart-sickened for sight or sound of the land where we had been bred and born, lonely at memory of Kentish winters, for spring breaking over the lowlands, for the Thames's broad sweep beside Surrey meadows, for cottage gardens and for ancient walls crowned with gillyflowers, for twisting wooded lanes shaded by age-old trees, the sound of rushing water; and suddenly in a land altogether strange to us these things, or their very like, were given us. . . .

From New York we had travelled luxuriously by railroad carriage along the magnificence of the Hudson River to the dowdy little village of Etten, and thereafter by its one shabby public motorcar to the massive stone pillars which marked the entrance of Mandrake Lane. The gilded lettering above the gate welcomed us, but the gates themselves were fastened and needs must we halt while Benjamin Froste descended and twisted the opening lever. Time and again I have beheld such a gate in Kent. Time and again I had twisted such levers with my own hands. And it seemed indeed the wide lane into which thereafter we entered was a bit of springtime England, fragrant with budded bloom of hawthorn hedge, and the heady odour of turned loam in the ploughland beside it; bright with the yellow of dandelions and pristine grass, with the deep blue violets and the tender green of newly leafed trees. A mile or more we went and then in the shadow of ancient oaks the lane turned abruptly northward to end in a broad sweep of driveway, circling a house very like to many a one to be found in English shires. Serene and solid it stood and very lovely, its yellow-painted bricks as familiar as had once been Ellersly Hall, or the stately manor-house of Kate's family. The motorcar halted and no sooner had the driver opened the door when young Stephen scrambled forth and set about a child's myste-

rious concern with unfamiliar places. Neither Kate nor I had impulse to stir or to do other than knuckle our eyes as we had done long ago on Christmas mornings, for it seemed neither house nor garden nor terrace held reality and were more than figments of confused dreaming.

Behind a screening of trees we glimpsed dancing blue waters of a springtime river. Above it birds drifted idly or rose, circled and dipped again in their immediate and peculiar errands. Midday sun lay full on garden and terrace, and a frolicking breeze teased the gaudy canvas of garden chairs and monstrous umbrellas grouped at the terrace edge. The immense sweep of lawn was dotted by crescents and stars of old-fashioned phlox and columbine, pinks, rose geranium and tansy, and bees bumbled and droned lazily among them. From below the cliffs came the lap of water against the rocks; from the wood beyond muted chirruping of nesting birds. And we turned towards one another in mute felicitation and appreciation of the wonderful thing that had come to pass.

Whim or fancy of the dead Sarah Mandrake had caused our reception to be ceremonious, and when at long last we had done with our gawping and descended from the motorcar, Benjamin Froste presented me with a huge brass house key of full two pennyweight heft, and thrusting it into the lock I opened the door—and Stephen Ellers and his family were at home.

Had we been alone I would have striven to bear Kate over the threshold. As it was, with young Stephen between us we entered a long, broad hall-corridor and at once astonishingly and completely we were become part and parcel of Mandrake House. A fan-shaped transom of tinted glass threw prismatic colouring on the floor of the hall and on head and shoulders of a mighty man standing silently beside the door. Such man as might have served the ancient gods of Greece. Such man as might very well have been the lone survivor of the lost art of butlering, for had the word "butler" been blazoned on his forehead his craft could not have been more apparent, and to come upon so perfect a specimen in so perfect a setting bewildered us more completely. We stood stock-still gazing at him, doubtless with mouth agape. This was not true of young Stephen. Regarding the giant so fantastically coloured by the fanlight he beamed mightily, his grin almost meeting behind his small ears, and freeing himself from his dazed parents leaped away and, clasping arms about gigantic

knees, leaning against gigantic thighs, he took possession of Peter Petralsky, butler in ordinary to Mandrake House, and from that day forth was to him master and minion, friend and foe, follower and leader.

Standing at the open door both Kate and I still felt need to knuckle our eyes, for the hall-corridor in which we stood was as British as suet pudding or the Albert Memorial. From its very centre a handsome stair circled upwards, describing an almost complete arc, the same stair which in time we were to regard with terror and dread. The massive banister was carved with intricate design of fruit and flower, and so carved was the manteltree above the wide hearth, frame and panelling of the doors, lintels and box of oblong casements. Save for an age-mellowed drugget before the hearth the floor was bare, and bare it should be, for nothing woven by the hand of mortal man could equal the patina of its wide pine boards and oddly patterned border of darker wood. Though the hall-corridor was extremely large it was furnished by no more than a pair of handsome Jacobean chests, a toasting seat cushioned in crimson velvet circling the hearth, and above it a painting of two magnificent hunting dogs framed into age-saffroned plaster, and an ancient rosewood clock, almost ceiling high, whose fainéant pendulum seemed scarcely to move at all.

And so it was that Stephen Ellers, his wife and Stephen his son first set foot in the house that in time was to become hell and heaven to them, and with the colour of transom glass glowing like a benediction about their heads, stood listening to a woman clad in a sparse silk gown who, in clipped British accent, read words written by the hand of the dead Sarah Mandrake, bidding us welcome to Mandrake House; bidding us be at our ease and to dwell forever in peace within its walls, a thing which we were in time to know was a great deal easier said than done.



CHAPTER TWO

SPRING was lush when first we came to Mandrake House, and to Kate and me, fervently telling the rosary of our blessings, it seemed the most completely beautiful season we had ever known. But the summer which followed, abundant in fruit and flower, in sun and fragrance, was equally lovely, and to our war-harried bodies and souls such leisure and quietude as we knew were reward and benediction far beyond our deserts. Day after day throughout spring and summer we sprawled in lounge chairs at the terrace edge, listening to the river murmuring below us, listening to bird song and whispering trees, soaking into our bodies more sun than ever we had known in our life, beholding the large glory of hills and mountains, the smaller glory of young Stephen's endless capering in comical and unavailing effort to net brilliant day-moths fluttering above beds of old-fashioned flowers. But betimes rousing ourselves from pleasant lethargy we tramped footpaths of Mandrake Wood on such jaunts as my halting and unreliable limb and Kate's child-burdened body could accomplish.

In August when we had dwelt three months at Mandrake, complying with the unusual terms of Sarah Mandrake's will I on the first day of the month passed on to those others also mentioned as legatees various property and moneys bequeathed them. And Solomon in all his glory could not have felt more opulent than I did as I set my name to banker's cheques to be sped to my mother, to my great-aunt Fanny, excellent and earnest Duchess of Hone, to Philip and Henry, her two still-living sons, and with great good heart bestowed upon Peter Petralsky and Ellen Meadows a deed executed by Sarah Mandrake

prior to her death giving them lifelong occupancy of the north addition of Mandrake House, and upon one Jacob Schultz and his heirs forever the outright possession of the stone cottage at the end of Mandrake Lane and the immediate five acres surrounding it. And to each of these three persons I gave also twenty-five thousand dollars bequeathed them by Madam Mandrake, and the assurance that so long as ever they chose to serve Mandrake House they would receive in addition one thousand dollars per annum.

If it seemed somewhat odd that Jacob Schultz, a person whom Sarah Mandrake had known only since her return to Mandrake House, should receive a legacy equal to that of Peter and Ellen who had served her for a goodish portion of their lives, it was not for me to question, nor to question the fact that this unskilled workman would receive the identical remuneration for his labours as Peter and Ellen, whom I judged to be excellently trained craftsmen. Having done these things as was bidden me to do, I thereafter set in motion wheels which would in time make me a citizen of my adopted country.

With September came the hint of changing seasons in the iridescence of mist which morning and evening hung low over the hills and in the ever-changing hue of the river. Unlike our English autumns, the days were balmy, the nights held little chill and the fires which blazed on Mandrake hearths were more for our delight than actual need of warmth. But at the month's beginning Kate suffered a mysterious illness which alarmed me greatly. Ellen Meadows, housekeeper to Mandrake, had come upon her quite unconscious at the stairhead in the mid-corridor, and as I considered any unwarranted illness during pregnancy dangerous I rang through to a Van Etten physician and though I chose quite at random from the telephone directory I was fortunate enough to hit upon one whom Kate had already consulted. He came immediately but could find little amiss and, beyond suggesting rest and relaxation, did nothing at all.

It was at this time I first became aware of something strange in Mandrake House. For several nights I slept fitfully on the couch in our bedchamber, and Kate's slightest movement brought me fully awake. I think it was the third night of her illness when, hearing the tinkle of glass, I hastened to find what was needed, and as the water in the carafe seemed stale bore it with me downstairs to fill it afresh

from the iced water in the mechanical box. As I crossed the threshold I beheld, or thought I beheld, a tall woman standing quietly among the shadows of the hall-corridor. As I stared, blinking and sleepy, the apparition seemed to merge into thin air and the one thing which remained definite was the memory of a bright shawl and a crown of silvery hair.

When wits became stable I touched a finger to the wall button and flooded the place with light, but there was no one at all in the hall-corridor, nor was there in the room into which the woman seemed to have vanished, though oddly it held the atmosphere peculiar to recently occupied places. I cursed myself for a dream-ridden fool and, after bringing the water from belowstairs again, laid myself down on the couch and for the remainder of the night tossed wakeful, striving to convince myself I had really seen nothing at all.

But from that night onwards I knew well enough not only my family and servants dwelt under Mandrake's roof but unseen and unwelcomed others as well, and I began to wonder if those who had dwelt before me in the ancient house had left behind personalities so vigorous they would forever endure. Often as I sat alone I seemed to hear the whisper of passing footsteps, the rustle of garments or the soft sound of drawn breath, and from their eyrie on the walls painted eyes of Mandrake men gazed into mine with concern and understanding, with humour and at times I thought with pity and even remorse. I was ashamed lest illness had weakened wit as well as body and strove with might and main to thrust such thoughts from me. Nevertheless they persisted and in time I was to know that Kate also was troubled by occurrences which she did not understand, and the illness that preceded her confinement was caused by her confusion.

Slowly and beautifully the autumn closed in. From the orchard behind Mandrake came the heartening smell of apples and of burning brush. River marshes were sheathed in purple mallow, and fen and fell blazed with showy panicles of foxwort and goldenrod. At eventide crickets strummed staccato music, and from shallow water frogs croaked harsh and mournfully. Knowing these things, I felt indeed that never had been a man so blessed as I. But often enough I have wondered, if in that lovely season it had been made known to me the terrors I must in time endure, would I have fled Mandrake altogether or, setting valiant hand to plough, gone forwards. Surely

in so arranging the book of life that but one page at a time is revealed, God's wisdom is great.

As days passed the strange atmosphere of Mandrake increased. As Kate's activities were curtailed I was left with more leisure than was agreeable to me, and partially to fill vacant hours and partially to know more of the lives of Mandrake men and women who had dwelt before me in the ancient house, I began assortment and perusal of bundles and caskets of letters penned by hands long dead, industriously scanned house-books and journals recording thought and act, joys and sorrows, remuneration and outlay of those who for nigh onto two hundred years had lived in Mandrake House. It was greatly akin to a gigantic puzzle, fascinating and incomplete, and to supply the missing bits I began a studious search for recordings of marriage, deaths, sales or transfers of land and anything and everything that concerned Mandrake House and Estate, and those who had dwelt therein.

In such search I browsed among musty tomes in the courthouse at Poughkeepsie, the archives of the towns of Van Etten and of Scarletville, Ione and Hendricks, and collected a vast array of legend and tales having to do with the families of Gresham, Hutton and Livingston, Van Etten and Phillips, who by wedlock had mingled their blood with Mandrake blood.

It was the most fascinating labour ever I laid hand and mind upon but needs must I thrust it aside on the last day of September to welcome into the world my tiny daughter who immediately by bell, book and candle and the vicar of Van Etten's Anglican church was christened Sarah Ellers-Mandrake.

Thereafter I had time in plenty for assembling data for a lengthy history of Mandrake, and possibly of the town of Van Etten, the County of Dutchess and the State of New York, for after the arrival of Miss Sarah neither my wife Kate nor any female under Mandrake roof had time or attention to bestow upon me. I got on with my labours and found somewhat to my astonishment that Hone House and Ellersly Hall predated Mandrake by considerably less than a century. Hone had been built in the notorious year of Monmouth's rebellion, Ellersly a scant decade later, while Mandrake House was brought into being in the eighteenth century by one Stephen Mandrake, a gentleman in full favour of His Majesty George III. It was by such sovereign's gracious will that in the year 1762 Stephen

Mandrake, companioned by a score of Kentish yeomen eager to go adventuring in the New World, set sail on the packet ship *Valiant Moon*, taking with him a King's grant for ten thousand acres of land in any portion of His Majesty's domain not already seized upon by other of his loyal subjects.

There is no doubt that the twenty-year-old Stephen was amazed by his long journey over the ocean, and stunned altogether at the length and breadth of the King's new country, for his diaries of the years 1762 and 1763 show vast confusion of mind and uncertainty as to what portion of the country it would be practical and advantageous for him to choose for his acres.

Why he settled in the lush Hudson Valley remains unknown, for he noted little of the reason for his choice nor why he had chosen to purchase a portion of his land from those who had already laid claim to it. It might very well be he was advised by his kinsman John Gresham, wealthy merchant of the city of New York, for in Stephen's brief tarrying in the household he had won the heart of fifteen-year-old Sarah Gresham, and departed in search of his estate betrothed to her indeed but with definite understanding he was neither to seek nor see her again until she had passed the tidemark of girlhood on her eighteenth birthday. Apparently even in the brave New World of the Colonies young ladies of fifteen years were considered somewhat immature to embrace wifehood.

If the spot on which Stephen Mandrake built his house was already free of timber, or if trees must be felled and land cleared for its building, age-brittle books wherein he set down trials, tribulation and expense of his estate do not state, for the first entry in such books was made on April 10, 1764, and had to do with the erection of a warehouse built of common field stone to keep from pilferage and destruction material for the dwelling he was about to build.

In round numbers he recorded the amount of bricks moulded from blue clay of the river bed below the cliff, kilned and dried on the bank and left to season in the warehouse until such time as they were needed. He set down also difficulties and expense of hewing pine, ash and wild pear into board for flooring and house trim, of felling and seasoning oak and locust and walnut with which to make rafter and beam and brace. He wrote of the expense of bringing from Holland tiles for his roof and the many hearths of his house; the money expended for blocks of Spanish copper to be

forged into cornice and leads; the cost of hand-wrought nails and bolts and screws, of locks and hinges. There was tabulation made of transportation from the port of New York by river barge of ornate casements, their diamond panes already leaded and set. From New York also came the great logs of Domingo mahogany, to be patiently carved into design of pellate leaf and oval berry of the Mandrake plant, the same design that had served to ornament escutcheon of Mandrake men when they were staunch and loyal subjects of the Crown.

At length he described the purchasing of drums of linseed and ochre and blocks of resin for craftsmen to blend into yellow paint, for, in all things and as well as he might, the first Stephen Mandrake had fashioned and coloured his house in the New World in the pattern and substance of the one in which he had been bred and born in the Old. Proud and complete by midsummer of 1768 the house stood high on the cliff above the river, well sheltered from whatever weather the seasons might bring by dense growth of trees to the north and east and south, and on the west the distance from the river to his threshold spent the wind's force before it could rattle boisterously at casement and door.

When the dwelling had been completed there was no need for the warehouse; it was fashioned into a great barn for cattle, a stable for Stephen's horses with lofts above to hold an abundance of fodder and grain, and before snow fell cottages built of the same field stone dotted the acres adjacent to Mandrake House to shelter the men who, with Stephen and in his service, had come the long road from their Kentish homes. Many of them had already found wives among the buxom daughters of the valley's Dutch farmers to love, keep them clean and sober, and to bear their children.

When smoke poured from the last completed cottage chimney, there began a great felling of trees and clearing of land to make a wide lane linking Mandrake Estate to the Albany Post Road, but it was spring before its entrance was marked by pillars of solid masonry bearing aloft an iron banner on which the word "Mandrake" was blazoned in lettering of solid gold. Stephen Mandrake, however, was not there to see this done, for when his house had been completed he turned the huge brass key in the lock, leaving as Mandrake's guardian one John Faulkner, for which service is recorded the payment of five gold sovereigns per annum "with dwelling and keep."

And there is further entry of moneys entrusted to the same John Faulkner for payment in his master's name of wage to the men who had wrested Mandrake farmland and gardens from the virgin wilderness.

By another packet ship, the *Windhawk*, Stephen had set sail for the Old World to purchase the gear for his house in the New, and made careful recording of sums paid for Persian carpets and for be-floralled and medallioned carpets of Aubusson, for hangings of crimson damask and of Lyons velvets in royal blue and in gilt, brave furnishings indeed for a house in the heart of the wilderness.

In due time Stephen returned and thereafter wrote down of the receiving "by consignment on the ship *Bravatura* 3 burnished satinwood bureaux, 4 mahogany bureaux, 3 tester beds of satinwood, 4 tester beds of mahogany, one banquet, one serving table and two cupboards of rosewood, executed in claw-leg design, 4 arm, 16 side chairs, also of rosewood cushioned in scuff velvet of a red colour."

And there were other items, also the result of Stephen's journey to Europe: "two crystal chandeliers and sconce for a hundred candles received in good condition," wardrobes of mahogany and satinwood, and slender-legged tables of marquetry and buhl, longues of baize repp and chairs cushioned in satin of a "good blue colour," an "ebony pianoforte inlaid with pearl substance," painted screens, manteltrees which had once adorned the hearths of an Emperor's palace, bibelots and ornaments, tables, footstools and delicate cabinets, basins and ewers of silver, paintings bordered in velvet and paintings framed in solid gold, Flemish tapestries, napery spun on Irish looms, valance and curtains woven by patient fingers of nuns to adorn the marriage bed of Stephen and his bride.

For no sooner was Mandrake arrayed in its treasures when Stephen again fared forth to the house of John Gresham, and there placed upon the finger of the daughter Sarah the marriage band that had once been his mother's. Shortly thereafter Sarah, in crinoline and taffeta, stepped demurely beside Stephen through the portals of Mandrake House, and within its walls lived out the brief span of her life.



CHAPTER THREE

IT WAS 1772 when Stephen and his bride set out in the swaying coach which was to carry them the long miles lying between John Gresham's home in the city of New York and Mandrake House in the northern portion of the state. It was 1773 when Sarah bore a son, and called the infant Stephen for his sire. Before another year had fled she bore a second child, a girl hastily christened Sarah before it was laid in the arms of its dead mother and buried in a space which was in time to become the village churchyard. Well indeed had Stephen Mandrake loved the girl he had taken to wife and after her death the house he had so lovingly fashioned and furbished for her pleasure became to him no more than an empty shell, nor did the existence of his infant son in any manner compensate for her loss.

What had been Stephen Mandrake's condition of life before he set out on his journey to the new country, or why he had been given the enormous grant of land, are matters lost in antiquity. The wealth he brought with him was such he could not be dubbed an adventurer and if caustic comment written into his journals can be credited, he bore his King and benefactor neither affection nor gratitude. In the year 1775 he tore entirely asunder bonds binding him to his liege lord. Leaving small Stephen to the care of John Faulkner's buxom wife, he joined Arnold and Montgomery on their march on Quebec and from the rigours of a single campaign returned a wounded and broken man. And a broken man he remained until the year preceding his son's maturity, at which time he went willingly enough to lie in a grave beside his Sarah. In such grave ended the first generation of Mandrakes in the new country.

Strangely enough, little is known of the second generation of Mandrakes—no more indeed than brief entries in the parish register of the town of Van Etten, which show that in the year 1803 Stephen Mandrake wed Felice Livingston, that in 1805 a daughter Susan was christened at its font and two years later a son Stephen was also christened there. But of death or burial of Stephen or Felice his wife no record is to be found either in Van Etten or other towns adjacent to Mandrake. Of their living they left scant trace, of their dying no trace at all.

In 1825 the church register records the marriage of Susan to Scottish Ian MacGregor, and a few faded letters written her family make known the fact she lived childless her life long in her husband's country without once returning to her cradle-land.

Her brother, Stephen Mandrake the third, with detailed elaboration in the year 1832 wrote in his journal of his marriage to Maria, eldest of the four daughters of the deceased Michael Hutton of the town of Saugerties, and it was to house his three small sisters-in-law apart from his bride and himself that Stephen added the north addition to Mandrake House, which a century later was to shroud Mandrake in direful mystery. In fourteen years of wedlock Maria Hutton bore her husband twelve children, but only the three last born lived to maturity: Stephen, Maria and Sarah.

When Sarah, the youngest, was in her fifth year Maria went wearily to rest in Van Etten's churchyard beside the first Stephen and Sarah his wife, and after her death gaming houses of Albany, cocking mains of the Hudson Valley, gay belles and blades of New York and Philadelphia knew Stephen far better than did his own household. Apparently the love he bore his Maria was buried with her in her grave, for seemingly none of it passed to her children. Nevertheless, when the approach of war between the States became too definite to be ignored, Stephen sat in council with his solicitors and men of business and directed the division of Mandrake Estate, both property and specie—the major portion of land and money to become property of his son, the fourth Stephen Mandrake, upon maturity, certain other portions to be sequestered and divided equally among Maria and Sarah, his daughters, and Edith, Edna and Emma Hutton, his wife's young sisters.

Having accomplished these things he pocketed the remaining portion of Mandrake's fluid wealth, bade nonchalant adieu to his

family and, without excuse or explanation for his strange migration betook himself over the ocean where clamour and alarm of war would ring but dimly in his ears. Nor did a single one of his kith or kin ever again look upon his face. How he lived, where and when he died or what became of the fortune he carried with him into self-appointed exile remained forever unknown, for among the age-saffroned letters penned by Mandrake men and women there is not single scrawl from the hand of the third Stephen, although indifferently enough he left behind him his numerous and carefully written diaries.

The last entry was made in July of 1860 when he wrote boastfully and at length of dining with Edward, Prince of Wales, on his visit to the States, adding almost as an afterthought his intent to sail for France on the ship *Corsair* on the first day of August. This entry to all intents and purpose ended the third generation of Mandrakes. With the fourth generation we have much to do.

In 1861 the last Stephen Mandrake had still to live a full half-decade before coming into his vast inheritance. Unlike his sire he wholeheartedly loved Mandrake land and the gracious dwelling built by Stephen the first, but nevertheless in June of 1861 he waved a casual hand in farewell to his sisters and aunts and went a-sailing on the Hudson River, with definite purpose. The sixteen-year-old boy crossed the river to Kingston, enrolled in the Ulster Guards, and with the Ulster Guards served the Union for four long hellish years, taking from such service no more hurt than an often empty belly and occasional bloody nick from a Confederate bullet. Unlike the first Stephen, the fourth was little harmed by war, and the lad who at the close of the Civil War returned to Mandrake was more stalwart in body and soul than the one who had stolen away from it. However there was still a full twelvemonth before the veteran of bloody battle could lay claim to his property, and it was the autumn of 1866 before Stephen Mandrake became in fact legal master of Mandrake House and lands.

In 1867 Maria, the elder of his sisters, wed Paul Van Etten, a scion of the family for whom the town of Van Etten had been named, and at the end of a few more years Stephen Mandrake found himself living bachelor existence, for his mother's young sisters, Edith, Emma and Edna Hutton, had found for themselves husbands not

averse to sharing their fortune, and Sarah, Stephen's young sister, took to herself a mate in the person of Cyrus Van Etten, the staid and elderly brother of her sister Maria's husband.

For seven years Stephen Mandrake dwelt lone at Mandrake House. He found no woman who might rival the beauty of his broad acres. In neither appearance nor character did the fourth Stephen resemble his sire. In visible aspect and in many of his attributes he was a throwback to the first Stephen; dark as a Spaniard and long of limb, broad-shouldered, thin-hipped and lithe, was this man of the fourth generation of Mandrake men. A sailor who knew the river, the tide and whimsies of wind and water, a huntsman who knew even better trails and hideaways of game between the Berkshire Hills and the Hudson, who fingered the keys of his great-grandame's harpsichord with a musician's touch, who loved books as a student loves them and fondled them tenderly as one fondles a loved child; who, regardless of weather, daily swam the river, and, stripped to the waist in spring and autumn, held his plough in as straight and speedy a furrow as any ploughman who ever took his wage.

It was fitting that in time such a man should snatch from under the nose of her gallants a belle the toast of the Hudson Valley, and so it was in his thirtieth year that Stephen Mandrake wedded Caroline Phillips, ten years junior to him, the daughter of Ernest Phillips and his wife Charlotte, residents of the thriving city of Newburgh, and brought her to live in the house that for three generations had been his sires'. Caroline Phillips bore her husband no children and no children crossed the threshold of Mandrake House until Sarah Van Etten's husband gave up his dignified and ancient ghost, and Sarah brought her two daughters, Fanny and Betsy, to make their home under its roof.

For a brief period only did they dwell with Stephen and his wife. Patently Mandrake's mistress was irked by the two little girls, and to avoid friction between Sarah and Caroline, Stephen hastily built for his sister and her children the south addition. The north was already housing Caroline's cousin Harry Phillips, a mysterious person whose dominant passion seems to have been the making of weird and clever clocks.

Henry Van Auken, whose grandsire had built the north addition, built the south in exact repetition, but Stephen bade him make of it a dwelling complete in itself and not a mere adjunct to the house

proper. When that had been done, Van Auken set about the construction of an ell at the rear of Mandrake House, identical to and opposite the kitchen ell. It contained a bedchamber, a library and a bathing room, and in one of these rooms on a bleak autumn morning the last Stephen Mandrake was found stark and cold, his head bowed upon his updrawn knees, his face and its covering fingers still damp with the moisture of tears. Why he had so died was a mystery he took with him to his grave, and why his wife Caroline should by every device known to her seek to erase all trace of the Mandrake family from the house in which they had dwelt for four generations was a mystery also.

Stephen Mandrake died in the year 1890; in 1891 Caroline wedded her cousin Harry and dwelt with him for thirty years in Mandrake House. And then they also were dead, and Mandrake's bricks and mortar, fields, farms and house treasures by terms of Stephen's will passed again into the possession of those of Mandrake blood, for Caroline his wife had been given no more than a lifelong interest in Mandrake House and the barest possible sum necessary to maintain it. At the time of Caroline's death Maria Van Etten and Sarah also had long been dead, and there remained to inherit only Sarah's elder daughter, Fanny, Duchess of Hone, her second daughter, the Honourable Betsy Ellers, their children and their grandchildren.

To Fanny and Betsy, Mandrake House had become a shadowy and obscurely scandalous memory; to their children it had no more substance than a fairytale and it is doubtful if their grandchildren had ever heard of its existence. None of the three living generations had the least desire to cross the ocean and take possession of their heritage, and so in time Mandrake House, its outbuildings and lands were offered for sale. But the taste of the fabulous twenties did not embrace ancient many-roomed dwellings with various appendages requiring expensive upkeep. During the years following Caroline's death, one by one Mandrake's farms and woodlands were marketed and the money paid for them sent to replenish the depleted coffers of Hone and Ellersly, but Mandrake House and its attending seventy acres, its ornate furnishings and ancient silver, its faded and forlorn draperies and carpets bound to it by the will of Stephen, found no purchaser. Thereafter for years on end they lay fallow and neglected.

After the financial débâcle of '29 all effort to care for, or even to dispose of the estate ceased and Mandrake was tenanted only by the

scurrying mice within its walls, rabbits in its fragrant, neglected gardens, birds nesting in the house eaves and little glistening snakes coiled in its sun-washed paths. In the bacchanalian year of '37 when Europe had entered into the last phase of its frenzied living, the banking house acting for what remained of Mandrake Estate received from a person calling herself Madam Sarah Mandrake inquiry regarding its possible purchase. She described herself as a grand-daughter by a second marriage of the third Stephen Mandrake who, generations before, had casually discarded his family and sauntered far and away from paternal obligations to them. Had she described herself as the grand-daughter of His Satanic Majesty himself the grave monetary gentlemen of the banking house would have lent her their credulous ear, providing of course she came as well laden with coin of the realm as did Madam Sarah Mandrake, real or pseudo as the case might be.

If the arrival of the new mistress of Mandrake had been accomplished without fanfare, her descent upon the little town of Van Etten would still have caused lengthy comment, but coming as she did, figuratively with blare of trumpets, she created a furor which will endure as long as the name of Mandrake endures. With Sarah Mandrake came a huge man, a foreigner, always suspect in rural communities, patently her servant and just as patently her friend, and with her came also a second foreigner, a vinegarish hostile woman who neither asked nor gave quarter in dealing with shop and market, and with workmen and women brought to Mandrake for its cleaning and refurbishing.

Through late spring and early summer these strange persons dwelt in the best rooms Van Etten's one hostelry had to offer. But well before autumn the south wing of Mandrake House had been made habitable and thereafter, bag and baggage, Madam Sarah removed herself to Mandrake and from such vantage point with energy and enterprise directed the rehabilitation of Mandrake Estate. No one who remembered Mandrake as it had once been could doubt her assertion that she had visited her half-brother Stephen when he dwelt there in bachelor state. Did she not point out irregularities of ground which marked the bed of the long-forgotten stone terrace that the malice of Caroline had destroyed? Did she not wrestle valiantly with craftsmen and architect in her steadfast knowledge of Mandrake as it had existed in the days of its glory?

And due to such knowledge and direction the time came when house and garden, lawn and terrace were again restored to the beauty of their yesteryear; hangings of damask and velvet as near to the originals in colour and design as could be managed shaded door and window. On the handsome old floors were spread carpets whose tone and texture were akin to those the first Stephen had so lovingly purchased for the delight of his Sarah. Cleaned and restored Mandrake portraits hung again on its wall, chest and bureau and bed burnished to their former splendour stood in the spaces they had forever occupied. Longue and settle and chair were cushioned and covered in silks and leather in the same hues they had worn in their proud heyday, and the ancient chiming clock, which for almost two centuries had marked the hours, began anew its soft and lovely singing. In the corridor above and below, the patina of carven wood glowed mellowly, and from cellar to house eaves the age-old dwelling lived again.

Sarah Mandrake walked in pride upstairs and down, finding the task to which she had set hand and heart well done. Through gleaming diamond panes she beheld the trees of Mandrake Lane shorn of dead growth and handsome against the sky, beheld proud formal gardens which she had called again into being, and between the house and cliff the huge stone terrace once again stretched away towards the river. Quaint flower beds dotted the green of cropped grass, and to the north in gloomy beauty Mandrake Wood raised its green branches to the heavens. In satisfaction Sarah drew from the keys of Sarah Gresham's harpsichord a paean of thanksgiving, and found the music flowed from it as sweetly as ever it did when Mandrake's first mistress played to her bridegroom, while he leant over its polished wood to gaze into her eyes.

In the years which followed her coming, Sarah Mandrake lived content in the house which again had become a home, and time sped all too quickly for the woman for whom the ending of her road of life was already in view. There came a day in autumn when foliage of the tall birch beside the terrace was as yellow as Mandrake's bricks, and in Mandrake Wood maples flaunted bright garments of gold and crimson and brown, when scarlet clethra berries were brave against their sober pinnate leaves, and pine and larch stood sombre and aloof from the brightness of the skies. In the hush of eventide came the raucous call of wild geese, the muted music of their wings,

and in the glory of the setting sun Mandrake was as lovely as a sudden chime of silvery bells. From rooftree to cellar the house was again handsome and sturdy and so, God willing, it would remain until time crumbled its bricks to dust. Sarah Mandrake had seen to it this would be so, for in her will she had written certain terms which forever would stand between the house she cherished and decay, stand between it and the housing of casual and unloving strangers, between it and the thousand misuses and abuses which lonely unloved houses know.

The strange woman's strange task was done, and the time had come when there was no longer reason or peace in her lingering. And so on a bright October day Peter Petralsky settled his mistress in a lounge chair at the terrace edge and Ellen Meadows had lingered to tuck a covering about her feet before she followed Peter into Mandrake House. When darkness fell, as they had been bidden to do, the twain returned to find the chair empty—and Sarah Mandrake vanished from the face of the earth. There was no doubt at all that in the hours which lay between the going of her servants and their return the soul-weary woman had crept down the cliff stair, for the shawl she had worn wrapped about her shoulders was found caught by a point of jagged rock on the riverbank and lay dipping its fringe into the water. A buckled shoe drifted with neap tide to the village below Mandrake House. A floating weed held in its fronds a shred of lace she had worn at her throat, but of Sarah Mandrake herself there was no trace at all.



CHAPTER FOUR

THE MORE I delved into the history of this amazing house the more I was fascinated by it, though for long enough it seemed indecent for me, so recently come, to scan ancient books and secret writings of long-dead men and women, to weigh and consider and say of one that he was a fool and of another that he was a man of wisdom or foresight or honour. Most incredibly, when effort to assort and arrange became confused, mind and hand seemed directed into proper channels, and whatever snarl hindered me was quickly smoothed and undone. At times I was convinced Mandrake harboured a kindly phantom who was constantly at my elbow encouraging and urging me forwards in the task I had attempted. At other times I attributed my extreme sensitivity to long hours of endured pain and prayed fervently that my fantastic notions of a friendly assisting shade would vanish when I had regained a more wholesome state of flesh.

After days of endless, painstaking labour, house-books, letters and journals dealing with each generation of Mandrake from the year 1763 until the death of Caroline in 1921 lay in neat rows on my writing table. And in time I added to these the gist of my frequent chats with those having a tale to tell and whatever of legend and conjecture I had garnered throughout the countryside.

But when Mandrake passed into the hands of Sarah Mandrake its history seemed to cease, for no one at all knew aught of her, not even Benjamin Froste, since he had possessed no knowledge of her existence until she had engaged his service in purchasing Mandrake House. As for Peter and Ellen, who had been her servants for many a year, they turned shocked and very deaf ears to my questioning,

making it apparent decent servants did not discuss the past of a mistress, even a dead mistress, but of certain facets of her life they chatted freely enough.

It was from Peter I learned it was Sarah Mandrake's quaint conceit to have placed upon the doors of each bedchamber plates bearing the name of its long-ago occupant. The corner chamber which I share with Kate has three such plates graven with the names of Sarah Gresham, Felice Livingston and Maria Hutton. Obviously this chamber has ever been held sacred for the mistress of Mandrake and I immediately gave order for a similar plate on which "Kate Ferguson" is writ. In due time this also shall be placed upon the door. The chamber next it, overlooking Mandrake Lane, has on its panels the same words which are scratched upon its leaded panes: "Susan Mandrake her room." I wondered if small Susan had scratched it there with a childish bauble or if an older Susan in nostalgic determination not to be forgotten had written it with the jewel Ian McGregor had thrust upon her finger before she went forth with him, never to return.

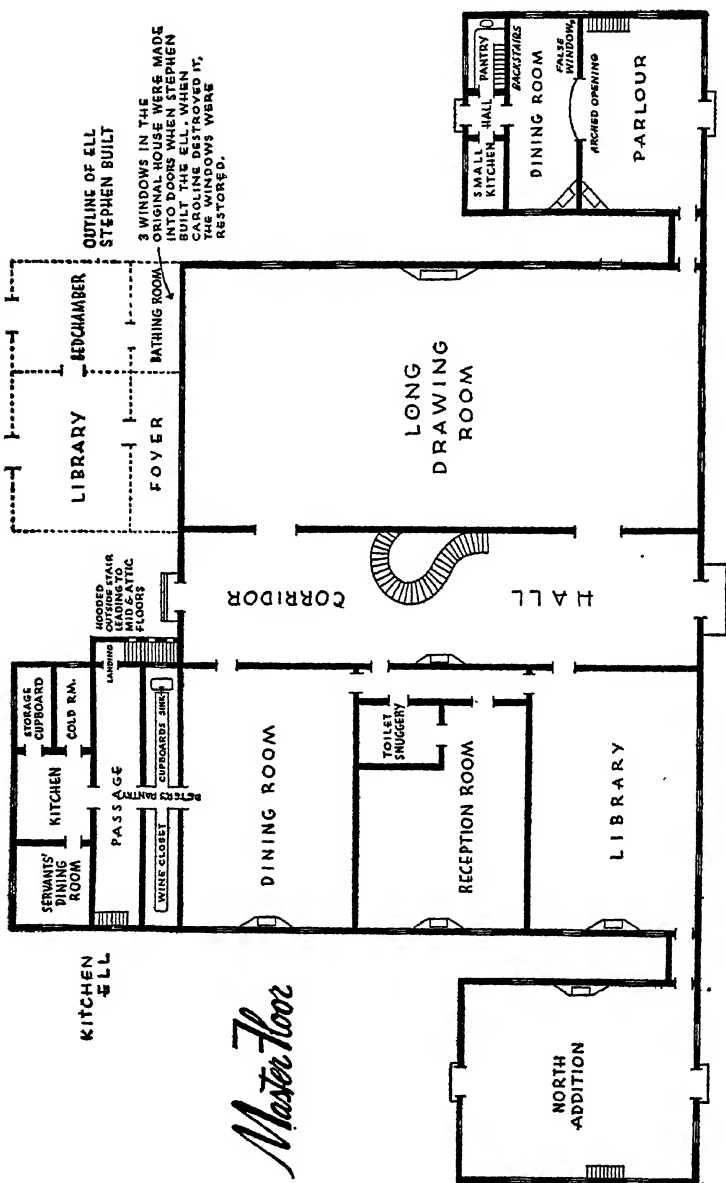
Beyond Susan's is a sunny and pleasant large chamber facing east and south, with "Sarah Mandrake" blazoned on it; and here undoubtedly my great-grandame titivated and preened, dreamt the dreams of maidens and slept her nights away. And this chamber today harbours another Sarah Mandrake, who kicks her small heels and crows joyously as did perhaps that other Sarah long ago. On the northeast side of the hall-corridor is a second corner chamber whose door is marked "Stephen Mandrake," and this my son Stephen quickly claimed for his own. I do not know if bachelor Stephens dwelt in it before they went to join their loves, or if some Stephen Mandrake had intent to forswear conjugality forever and dwell there lone and by himself.

Beyond the Stephen chamber is one of lesser footage marked with the name of Maria Mandrake and next to this two doors bearing the words "Caroline Phillips" are entrance to a suite of bedchamber, boudoir, dressing room and bathing room, far and away the handsomest and most luxurious chambers on the mid-corridor. I had designated their use to Kate, but Kate preferred the homelier chamber of Sarah, Felice and Maria, and for long enough the suite went unoccupied, perhaps because they were the lone portion of Mandrake for which neither Kate nor I felt affection.

The hall-corridor on the mid-floor is quite as spacious as the one belowstairs, and while I shall attempt no detailed description I consider it well to mention certain facts concerning it which were later to play an important part in the fantastic occurrence that in time beset Mandrake House. Here also are a hearth and overmantel carved in the same design as that of the banister of the circling stair. The hall is lighted only by a huge window of coloured glass, and unless the electrics are on, is always somewhat shadowy. Beneath this window is a monstrous-sized claw-legged dower chest. Two high-backed settles face each other across the hearth, and it was on one of these drawn beside my door that Jacob Schultz slept through troubled nights now so happily passed. Over the mantel once hung a painting of wind-blown wild geese, and there was a long mirror framed into the plastering just opposite to the stairhead, but both painting and mirror are gone, wrecked in the havoc of a dreadful time which shook Mandrake to its very foundations. Over the mirror's vacant space is draped the shawl which so confused us on the night small Sarah vanished, and in place of the painting above the mantelshelf there is a great map of Europe, its bright pins marking Allied progress. But the floor is altogether bare, for the lovely old druggets which had covered the corridor were destroyed on another horrendous night which Mandrake knew.

Belowstairs south, east and west an immense drawing room extends the entire breadth of the house, and the north side of the hall-corridor is divided into three rooms. At the rear of the dining room, which faces north and east, is a large ell, housing the servants' common room, storage-space cupboards, Peter's pantry, a narrow passageway and the kitchen. On the far side of the dining room is the formal reception room and a toilet snugger, and beyond that the library. And it is important to Mandrake's history that I mention these rooms also.

On the library walls are paintings almost identical in size of four generations of Mandrake men. Above the mantelshelf is a portrait of the first Stephen, whose utter elegance belies an entry written into his journal in the year 1770: "This day I felled an unruly bull which sought to attack me." How was he clad when he felled his bull? I wonder. Surely not in such lace-befurbished coat as the painted Stephen wears. Not, I believe, in powdered wig and satin breeks, and not by a thrust from the slender sword swung from lace knotted



at his waist did Stephen fell his bull. If I know men, it was by a twist of the sinewy hands resting nonchalantly on sword hilt and table edge. A mighty man was this first Stephen, his swarthy skin accentuated by snowy wig; well-spaced eyes he had and a haughty Norman nose, a tender mouth, a square and honest jaw, wide shoulders beneath a bright blue coat and great thighs straining the elegance of his breeks.

Mayhap it was his wedding garb Stephen donned for the painter's brush, but he would have appeared to greater advantage had his thews and sinews been less closely confined, for to my mind this Mandrake, in youth at least, was a ranting stalwart fellow, more stalwart by far than his son, the second Stephen, hanging on the opposite wall. A man cast in more fragile mould, tawnier of hair, his eyes hazel but with the same direct glance as the darker eyes of his sire. Austere and troubled of mien was this Stephen painted in a mustard coat, his fluted stock spread nicely over a sprigged waistcoat, his peruke in perfect order. There are shadows beneath the high cheekbones and the veined hand clasping the cocked hat is overthin, but for all his fragility the second Stephen bears marked stamp of Mandrake blood.

The third Stephen, hanging on the west wall, bears none; the hair beneath the bell-crowned beaver hat is yellow as burnished brass, and eyes peering from beneath sparse brows are a proud and chilly blue. A high black stock twisted about his throat holds aloft the points of a pristine collar, and the straight edge of his beflowered waistcoat fits smoothly over the waistband of breeches only a little less yellow than his hair. Topping the jewel-studded ruffled shirt is a long-tailed coat of snuff-brown cloth collared and cuffed in velvet of darker hue. The gloves clasping the cane thrust beneath his arm are a dandy's gloves, the cane is a dandy's cane, and the pictured face is that of a man high in his own conceit. Of all the Mandrake men, low mark for the third Stephen.

The fourth Stephen Mandrake hangs on the east wall, and at eventide the setting sun seeps through a window facing west and glorifies a face so young one regards with wonder the soldier garb beneath. Surely it is a dreamer's face, a man not meant for killing, yet the record of Stephen in the War between the States is formidable for all his youth. Over the dining-room manteltree hangs a second portrait of the last Stephen Mandrake, painted in more mature years.

A kindly humorous face above the mottled tweed of a country coat, a silver-hafted riding whip held over his crossed knee, a brace of hounds eager beside him—such man as this might well be proficient in the art of slaughter but surely not the lad on the library wall, the down of youth still glossy on his cheek.

Across the corridor in the long drawing room hang the portraits of Mandrake's mistresses. Over the tracery of an Adam mantel is the first Sarah Mandrake, born Gresham, a grisaille child as dark-eyed as her husband, her hair hidden beneath a glossy wig bedecked and be-curved in the fashion of her time; a stiff jeweled stomacher scarcely covers her childish bosom. Sleeves drip filmy ruffles framing dimpled elbows but leave rounded shoulders bare. Slender, ringed fingers clasp a tiny fan, and about her throat is a necklet of bright stones, but for all her sophisticated finery Sarah Gresham peers at the world with a child's wondering eyes.

To the right, between manteltree and window, hangs Felice Livingston, wife to the second Stephen, a woman who wears—nor needs to wear—few feminine fripperies. Yellow hair parted at the center is woven into braids and looped beneath her pretty ears, the ends held at the top of her head by a solid and sombre comb. The lustrous silk dress bears no ornament at all save a lacy scarf flung about her shoulders and held modestly at the breast by hands shorn of jewels save the broad band of her wedding ring. A handsome woman was Felice Livingston, yet a selfish one is she judged by thinness of lips and closely set eyes as proudly blue as those of her dandy son smirking down from the library wall.

To the left of the chimneypiece is magnolia-skinned, brown-eyed Maria Hutton, Mandrake's third mistress. Dark ringlets are bound at her temples by nosegays of bright flowers and the crimson gown spread handsomely over crinoline is made more vivid still by the gold of stiffly looped drapery behind her. Her smiling mouth is generous, her eyes kind. The bones under her heart-shaped face patrician. Truly, a splendid and lovely woman was my great-great-grandame Maria. And Kate pleases me mightily by tracing resemblance between us. No portrait of Mandrake's fourth mistress hangs with the Mandrake dames on the panelled walls, and for this omission there was good reason, as in time we were sadly to know.

In the suite whose door bears her name Caroline smiles from a golden frame, clad in the absurd furbelows of the eighties and painted in

the spectacular heavy brushery of such period. Limpid grey eyes coquet beneath arched brows and the titian hair tortuously curled on her forehead is rolled into a grotesque bun on the nape of her neck, but it does not mar her loveliness, nor does the huge bustle jutting below her tiny waist. Half-profile she stands, a ruffled parasol framing her tilted saucy head. The hand grasping the long staff is jewel-laden, and jewels drip from her ears and circle the slender naked throat, gleam on the breast of her silken gown and even bedeck the collar of the foolish little dog on the ornate pedestal beside her. A lovely woman indeed was Caroline Phillips, but I think the artist, finding something sinister in her soul, mixed it with his colours, touched it with his brush, and for all her beauty I for one would not have taken her to wife. Yet well enough I understand why Stephen Mandrake wedded Caroline; why any man might wed her, though such act outraged his judgment and even his decency.



CHAPTER FIVE

AT THIS point it would be well for a little to deviate from Mandrake's past history and introduce characters which were to play stellar roles in the history to come. I shall begin with Jacob Zachariah Schultz who, were I king, I would immediately create court jester or perhaps royal teller of tales, for his agile mind harbours legends, chronicles and general store of misinformation in truly appalling quantities.

Born on a farm whose borders touch the edge of Mandrake Wood and which was once a part of Mandrake Estate, Jacob is nevertheless a man of mystery. The fact that he boasts but one leg adds to such mystery. There are many and gallant rumours as to how he parted with the absent member, but I, knowing Jacob as I do, am quite certain the gallant rumours stem from Jacob himself. He is of medium height, hungerish appearance, and character so secretive he approaches every act of life by the most indirect route possible. Did he desire a glass of water I have no doubt he would first describe the Atlantic Ocean, the harbour of New York, the Hudson River, its coves and inlets, until he finally arrived at spigot and glass. Many of his townsmen consider Jacob a thoroughgoing scoundrel. An equal number consider him to be an honest man, and not a few are ready to swear an invisible halo hovers over his naked poll and cherub's wings are folded under his faded shirt. I have at times subscribed to all three of these sentiments and to this day do not know which is the more fitting to him.

But there is no better delineation of Jacob's guileful character than the manner in which he induced me to become proprietor of some seven horses. Aside from a vagabond tom which, despite Mandrake's succulent kitchen odours and the coaxing of young Stephen, attached

itself to Ellen and remained secluded in the north addition, there was not a single beast about Mandrake House. I had expected to look up a brace of setters against the day I would be lusty enough to shoulder a gun and fare forth for a bit of shooting, and also to find a pup which might grow into a protector as well as playfellow for Stephen, but never did I once consider the accumulation of various types of horse-flesh.

Jacob was much too subtle to suggest outrightly the purchasing of horses, but in most uncanny fashion time and again I found myself in his company silently sauntering between vacant loose box and stalls, and even the tap of Jacob's peg leg sounded mournful and bereft.

Then one morning he said, "Seems to me like Miz Mandrake musta had her mind set on gittin' some horses, else why did she spend good money fixin' up these-here barns? Looka them loose boxes, boss. Fitten for humans they are, an' there they stand empty as an old maid's bed. And, say! you oughta go up in them lofts, boss, sided an' floored like a palace. Ain't no fodder in 'em, worse luck, nor grain in them fancy bins."

To Jacob's everlasting innuendo I turned cold heart and deaf ears. Came a day, however, when his importuning took on vigour and a new angle. On a bright morning weathered for lazing it had been my firm intent to loaf and invite my soul. Alas! I reckoned without Jacob, and as usual found myself pacing beside him the stable's length.

Sniffing disdainfully towards varnished walls, immaculate flooring and draining gullies, he said, "Barns didn't oughta smell thataway." He waited expectantly for comment and, when there was none, undaunted continued, "Barns oughta smell like manure an' oats an' bran." Then jerking his head upwards, he went on, "Them lofts oughta smell like timothy—yeah! timothy an' mebbe alfalfa. This-here asafetida's well spoke of too. Easy to raise, I heerd tell. Seed it down, wait awhile an' cut it—that's all there is to it. F'r that matter there ain't no need f'r even that. Enough nateral hay round here to feed a dozen horses."

Almost I missed the gist of Jacob's talk. My mind had snagged on the word "asafetida." I was quite certain I had never heard of its use as food for stock.

"I say, Jacob, is asafetida used as cattle feed in the United States?" I asked. "I thought it was something in the nature of a medicine."

the stinkin' stuff my maw usta tie around my neck. Can't be asafetida I mean."

He ruminated briefly, then brightened. "Shucks," he said, "'twere lepradeezy I was thinkin' of. That's it—lepradeezy. Heerd tell it beats timothy all hollow f'r feedin'."

And immediately Jacob launched into lengthy comparison of the merits of several fodders for cattle, while I in Lethean draught of words strolled half-somnolent beside him—to be shocked into wakefulness when he said, "Betcha yer gurls will quit cold if gas is shut off. Heerd tell it's a-goin' to be."

"What has a lack of petrol to do with the servants?" I asked.

Jacob squinted his eyes as he said, "How they gonna git to the movies, or git to have dates with fellas? How they goin' to git anything at all, way off here with no pee-trol, like you call it?"

It was a contingency I had not considered. It had been extremely difficult to keep Mandrake fully staffed with the limited amount of petrol allowed us. Without petrol it would doubtless be impossible, even though Mandrake's present quartette of handmaidens had lived long enough to realize that, while cinemas, the attention of gentlemen, and so on, are all very pleasant diversions they are not the beginning and end of existence.

Very thoughtfully I asked, "Do you really think if petrol becomes extinct the servants will leave?"

"I know danged well they will. Growl enough right now 'cause they only git to town once a week. Take that away from 'em and they'd scoot away quicker'n scat."

Weakly I capitulated and in no time at all found myself attending a sale in the city of Kingston. When the day was done I was dazed owner of a span of chestnut cobs, their harnessing, and a precarious carriage which might well have been foaled by a tandem cart and sired by a depot wagon. And in no time at all, in addition to the cobs, Mandrake boasted a team of draught horses, a pair of hunters and a slick fat pony, sole property of Stephen. Also, to care for them, three gentlemen of such age and quality as to be of no interest whatever to the military authorities.

Jacob was a happy man, for there is nothing on earth he so well loves as acting the taskmaster, and three permanent residents in the carriage loft, added to the two non-resident ancients who give their leisurely attention to Mandrake gardens, truly filled his cup to the

brim, affording him the right to say in the words of Holy Writ, "I also have men under me."

His personal duties to Mandrake have always been and are still diversified and of his own chice. It is Jacob who attends the orchard, designating the fruit that is to be stored for winter consumption, which to be sold, which to be borne to the mill for cider-making, and he decides also which trees have passed years of bearing and must be felled to make space for new growth. And it is Jacob himself who havers the trunks into logs for our hearths, and the branches into faggots for fire kindling, and one he stacks and the other he ties into bundles and hangs just so for their seasoning. And so he hangs branches of bayberry bush gathered among the river sedges, in time to strip them of waxen globules for the making of the handsomest candles ever I beheld—some cunningly coloured scarlet and cobalt and jasper green, and others moulded in natural state, having the translucence of frozen water. For hours on end, with no encouragement whatever, Jacob declaims on the art of candle-making, telling how he sought his dead mother's candle mould from door to door until he came upon it, and came also upon the carven and painted chests, tables and chairs carried by her grandsire the long journey from his Hannover home. In time he repurchased them, and her sad-irons and copper pots, and put them aside awaiting use from the wife he had never wed. It was Jacob who called attention to the very likeness between bayberry and Mandrake plant, and it is his quaint conceit that the first Stephen chose his land because of the abundant growth of the plant so akin to the one whose name he bore.

Peter Petralsky is the second of my household of whom it is necessary to write a revealing word. Until Mandrake's turmoil began I knew nothing of the man beyond the fact he was a long-trusted servant of Sarah Mandrake, but in time I was to know a very great deal indeed. Born in Poland of a Polish sire and a Russian mother, he spent his childhood in Latvia and his youth in a far corner of the earth. I assume his years to be in proximity to fifty. I know his weight unbelievably is eighteen full stone, and his height six foot four inches, yet I was to learn the man could move with agility and sureness of a leopard and that his strength is far beyond what might be expected in one of his years and girth. And because of these things in time to come I was to question Peter Petralsky's qualities, to doubt his good will and altogether to fear his intent.

Ellen Meadows is a third enigma harboured in Mandrake House. I do not believe Ellen has ever weighed as much as seven stone in her life. She is little over five feet in height. Nevertheless I have beheld huge Peter quail before her chilly glance. But also I have beheld Peter step by step go dismally down Mandrake's stair, his tears washing Ellen's face while he cuddled her mangled, unconscious body against his shoulder as a loved dolly is cuddled against the shoulder of a child. Ellen is no beauty but easily, if she would, she could mould herself into a vastly attractive woman; her dark eyes would be handsome were it not for their coldness, and her hair is handsome also but so savagely drawn towards her crown needs must her brows be forever raised in seemingly indignant astonishment. Thin as a witch, if she has either breasts or buttocks she has sternly suppressed them. But her tiny body harbours a "do-or-die" determination and courage few soldiers on the field of battle can surpass.

Never do I lay eye on Ellen but I marvel at her and I marvel at Peter also and at Jacob Schultze. It was these three persons who were most important in ridding Mandrake of its mystery and, paradoxical as it may seem, were equally important in revealing its existence.

There were others, of course, who were important also, but in lesser degree. Kate; I; small Rosemary York, young Stephen's governess and friend; Helen Tempest, the nurse who attended Miss Sarah's birth; Benjamin Froste and Jennifer his wife; Dr. Vanningham and his sister Prudence; the mystic Tia Singhe; Vicar Wilroy; the comic child Gamaliel Scott; and a Greek chorus of constables, juries and citizens of town and village to add to the confused and incredible tale of Mandrake House.

With a handsome autumn blessing the country, our house adequately staffed, conveyance galore in the stables, it would seem we might settle into enjoyment of our blessings, but not so. Directly it developed not a single horse in Mandrake stable could be induced to come next or nigh the house, and whoever was wishful to drive or ride needs must begin his jaunt from stable, yard or the turn of Mandrake Lane. Though I was puzzled and somewhat upset by equine idiosyncrasy, I thought it best to make nothing of it, lest our somewhat ancient handmaidens take alarm and depart. But I began to wonder how other animals would react towards Mandrake House.

Jacob had foisted his choice of horses upon me, and I feared he might do the same with the purchasing of dogs, which he insisted

were necessary to make Mandrake truly a gentleman's estate. Horses were one thing—very possibly Jacob knew a great deal more about horseflesh than did I—but dogs, who would be constantly underfoot, were quite another!

To outwit Jacob and his schemes I decided to make a family excursion and with Kate and young Stephen set out secretly on a dog hunt. To my chagrin Kate refused to leave Mandrake and I confess to annoyance at her excuse that Miss Sarah was quite too young to be left. I was puzzled also, for never has Kate been a hell-for-leather mother whose whole life is bound up in her offspring. Moreover, our thoroughly reliable Helen Tempest had a great deal more to do with the babe's care than ever did Kate, and Miss Sarah had already reached the maturity of her seventh week. With young Stephen sulkily enough I set forth, for I did not then know it was Kate's dread of a nameless thing that bound her to Mandrake House.

In time and in the vicinity of New York two serious men viewed every species and breed of dog known to mankind, and at the week's end I found myself bewilderingly the master not of a brace of setters on which I had set heart, but of a quartette of ingratiating spaniels of such ancestry, disposition and colouring as to become Mandrake vastly. When Stephen returned home he bore with him no terrier, Doberman pinscher or collie as we had planned, but quite the smallest dachshund ever I beheld in my life. From New York to Etten the wicker lay empty on the seat, and so lush was the romance between the little boy and the little dog, trainmen patently forebore to see the animal at all and permitted the lovers to gaze in ecstasy upon one another throughout the journey. When his love grew too great to be borne the pup flicked a minute red tongue over Stephen's face, and I would not have been at all astonished had Stephen returned the compliment in like manner.

But no sooner had we entered Mandrake than the pup's ebullient spirits vanished. It whined dismally and, cowering against Stephen, refused to be comforted until it had become a quivering mass of nerves, its small mouth a-drool with foamy slobber. When Stephen, well wearied by his jaunt, went early to bed bearing the sorry little dog with him, I waited until he slept and then bade Jacob carry it to his cottage. Though very much put out at our choice of canines, Jacob nevertheless set about cossetting and comforting the dachshund until it was again its frisky small self. But no more than the horses would


it of its own will come within stone's throw of the house, and when Stephen bore it squirming and complaining into the hall-corridor it would crawl abjectly under the nearest piece of furniture and cower there until it was again taken out of doors. For reasons best known to himself Stephen had christened the pup Danny. In the weeks following its arrival, from dawn until dark boy and dog romped happily in fields and orchards far to the rear of Mandrake House, but at eventide Danny had to be returned to Jacob's cottage and Stephen came lonesomely home by himself.

Perhaps the sacrifice asked of the small boy was too great, for one evening by guile and stealth Danny was borne up the rear stair and secreted in Stephen's huge wardrobe. It was a smug little chap indeed who bade us good night and for the first time in his life went cheerfully and early to bed—I presume carrying Danny with him. It may well be Rosemary was also in the secret. My heart has never been staunch enough to inquire, for it was Rosemary who found the dog crouched and dead against the wall, and if ever fright was depicted on the face of an animal it was on that of the dead Danny!

To this day I do not know how or why Danny died, but well enough I can guess now. I bade Jacob carry the small body to a vet, who was as vexed as I to know the reason for the small beast's demise, for he found neither mark of violence nor evidence of disease. To grief-stricken young Stephen I explained that no doubt Danny had crept from his arms and fallen to the floor and the lad, accepting my word as gospel, went sad and sorry for his mischief. I went sad and sorry also, but determined until I knew reason for the dachshund's frightened antics and unwarranted death I would not bring the spaniels to Mandrake, and wrote the kennels bidding them hold them for a more convenient time.



CHAPTER SIX

CTOBER twenty-sixth was the date of Danny's death, and just beneath the notation of this fact is another concerning the finding of a woman's body on the abandoned farm adjoining Mandrake on the north, the same farm which had once been that of Jacob's father, Herman Schultz, and there is further notation about the dread arrival of the law.

With Kate I had devoted much of that particular morning to consoling Stephen for his loss, and when at last he consented to leave off grieving and go forth for a gallop on Jerry, to offset our own distress we set out for a brief jaunt through Mandrake Lane to the highway and the village of Etten, and turned home again feeling fine and refreshed, but our fine feelings did not last us long. A brace of constables were awaiting us, and after a proffered (by me) and declined (by them) libation they got on with the business in hand.

For horrible moments we stood regarding one another while suspicion, apprehension, malice and other not too choice emotions churned in our several wary souls.

Tersely spake the chief constable: "Is your name Mandrake?"

"*Ellers-Mandrake*," I corrected him.

"O.K., *Ellers-Mandrake*," he mimicked. "Spill anything you know about a dame we just dug up down the road a piece."

My jaw dropped until I was quite certain I heard the crack of the mantibula against the upper sternum, but of speech I was wholly incapable.

Not so Kate. Taking umbrage at Sir Constable's manner she asked very unpleasantly indeed, "Whatever are you talking about, or do you know yourself?"

The constable answered her not. Keeping his piscine eyes on me

alone, he produced book and pencil, and after anointing the latter with saliva asked morosely, "How many people live here?"

On fingers laced nervously together behind my buttocks I counted Mandrake's inmates. "Thirteen," I said. Then bethinking thirteen a somewhat unlucky number, I hastily added Jacob to the score. "I mean fourteen," I amended brightly.

Without comment the constable continued to write, and nothing was heard save the scratch of pencil on paper. "Want me to read what I got down?" he inquired, and without waiting for yea or nay did so forthwith.

"Mr. Ellers-Mandrake said he did not know anything about a dead woman found on the farm north of his."

I thought his notation a bit on the silly side, but the chap seemed so desperately in earnest about the whole thing I felt I was lacking in courtesy when I was obliged to admit the written statement was wholly true, and when Kate also confessed ignorance to any and all knowledge having to do with the dead person I was shamefaced indeed. To my consternation I found the men of law were prone to link the disappearance of my benefactress with the unknown dead woman, to hold that murder, not self-destruction, lay in the death of Sarah Mandrake; and the fact I had become master of Mandrake at her death was most suspect circumstance. I was too taken aback to do more than stare and drool, but again in my behalf Kate took up verbal cudgels.

"What utter nonsense!" she told them. "There can be no possible doubt of Madam Mandrake's intention of taking her own life. She plainly indicated she was about to do so in her letters and in the arrangement of her affairs." She might as well have saved her breath. While his fellow suspiciously prowled the hall-corridor, the chief constable, spraddling the hearth, remarked ambiguously, "Oh yeah!" Then he added, "She mighta been made do them things. She wouldn't be the first old gal knocked off for her dough."

So intently did he regard me the while that I felt—and no doubt appeared—as guilty as bloody hell, of not one but a half-dozen murders.

"What's their names?" our interrogators next asked.

I had altogether forgotten his questions as to the number of persons staffing Mandrake and stammered, "Wha-what do you mean?"

"Perhaps he means the servants, dear," suggested Kate helpfully.

For me it was an ill moment, for I must confess, aside from Peter Petralsky, Ellen Meadows and Jacob Schultz, I did not know the names of those who served me.

"I know Jake Schultz all right," said the constable somewhat belligerently. "Nobody has to tell me anything about that guy. But what about these other two?"

"Peter is the butler, Ellen Meadows the housekeeper."

"Outside of their jobs what do you know about them?"

"Very little, I'm afraid, save they served Madam Mandrake for a long time and she left a sizable property to each."

"She did, did she?" our questioners exclaimed almost in unison, and were instantly off in full cry at the all-unknowing heels of Ellen and Peter. But when I mentioned that Jacob Schultz, a person altogether unknown to Madam Mandrake until a few years prior to her death, had also had a generous legacy from her, it was like drawing the proverbial red herring across the proverbial path. To a man they turned their large suspicions towards Jacob Zachariah Schultz, and with trepidation I envisioned the law chaining peg leg to bony ankle and fastening gyves about his poor wrists. But, in the idiom of the day, to say I was disturbed would be a masterpiece of understatement, for getting down to bedrock there was no use denying murder had been committed for vastly smaller sums than the legacies given Ellen, Peter and Jacob.

"How much dough did this Petralsky fella and the Meadows dame pull down?" inquired the man of law with poised pencil.

"Twenty-five thousand dollars each," I replied indifferently, as if a mere ten thousand pounds was nothing to make such a to-do about.

A long-drawn-out whistle followed. "Anything else?"

"Yes, she gave them lifelong occupancy in the north addition of Mandrake House."

"What did she want to do a thing like that for?" he asked curiously.

I did not know myself. So beyond what I hoped was an indifferent shrug I attempted no reply.

"What did Jake Schultz get?" he next asked.

"The same amount of money and outright possession of the stone cottage."

For a long moment the constable stared at me. "Are you kidding?" he asked.

Not knowing what he meant, I again made no answer, nor apparently did he require one, but with saliva and vigour sped his pencil over the pages of his little book, silently implying that, in his mind at least, there was no doubt concerning the cupidity of Ellen, Peter and Jacob, and, if the matter was left to him, all three without further waste of the law's valuable time would be hanged by the neck until dead.

I was bidden to summon the staff and I confess that, as each one entered the room, I peered at him with as much suspicion as the constables. To save my own skin from their possible ill intent I had impulse to remark that I had willed my entire fortune to a home for crippled acrobats and, as only such would benefit by my death, certain unnamed persons would do well to give over planning my decease.

Undoubtedly the constables had expended their stock of energy on our personal interrogations. When our tidy staff appeared they did no more than ask their names and scribble them forthwith on legal-appearing documents. When they had solemnly presented one document to each of us, they betook themselves off, leaving us standing about holding the silly bits of paper as gingerly as if they were about to explode in our faces.

No sooner had the door closed behind legal posteriors when in a high dither I was ringing through to Benjamin Froste, bidding him for God's sake come and stand between us and collective felons' cells. My incoherences must have impressed the man, for the same night dinner had scarce begun when Benjamin was among us and, sitting at table, asked, "What's all this fuss about a dead woman?"

"I'm a bit uncertain myself," I answered. "A brace of legal chaps dropped out of the blue, began harrying us about having done in Madam Mandrake and tucking her under the posies hereabouts."

Froste snorted. "Long-distance murder, eh? Did you mention you were in a hospital in England when Madam disappeared?"

I had no more than nodded when Kate irately interrupted. "Of course he did, or rather I did. Much good did it do. The silly old constable kept right on asking questions."

"What questions?"

Kate turned to me. "Can you recall exactly what they did ask, Stephen?"

I ruminated briefly. "Not word by word. They made a great pother and wouldn't take no for an answer when we declared we never in all our days heard of such person as the dead woman."

"What else did they do?"

"Oh, questioned us a bit about the staff and so on. When I made mention of legacies left Peter, Ellen and Jacob, we were forsaken, and in a trice they took after all three."

"Well, what do you know about the 'staff,' as you call them?"

"Really nothing in the world. They are entirely Peter's responsibility."

"Were they here when you came to Mandrake?"

"Heavens, no! Peter and Ellen were, of course, but I'd take oath we changed handmaidens a half-score of times. This set are really old retainers. They've served me loyally, man and boy, for as much as three months."

"What about the workmen on the place?"

"Townsmen, I believe, but I'm afraid you must apply to Jacob for their characters."

Froste twisted one long leg over the other. "Get the whole kit and boiling in," he said: "house servants, stablemen and what have you."

I reached a hand to the bell, then hesitated. "Hold on a bit," I told him. "Do you know Ellen and Peter are aliens?"

"I know they are aliens all right," he answered grimly, "and it's not so good."

"Do you mean if we are seriously drawn into this dead woman affair it would count in their disfavour?"

"Disfavour," sighed Froste, "is a pretty weak way of describing it."

He said no more. I summoned Jacob, told him I would like a word with him and with the stablemen. Before he could return with his minions Froste had finished interrogations of the tittering female servants and sent them about their business. When the male element had also been questioned and dismissed I bade Peter and Ellen fetch passports and whatever other credentials they might have. To our bewilderment Peter produced an array of documents vouching for the validity of many astonishing facts, the most pertinent being that in the year 1921 Peter Petralsky had become a duly anointed citizen of the United States. To our combined demands to know why and wherefore of such citizenship, Peter replied with verbal profuseness and very little information.

If Peter's citizenship confounded us Froste's interrogations of Ellen brought information that left us spent and speechless. After brief scanning of her passport he asked somewhat idly, "What is your second name, Ellen?"

"Belle, sir," answered Ellen promptly.

"Belle?" questioned Froste. "The passport reads 'Ellen A. Meadows.'"

"Why, you see, sir, my name is really not Ellen Meadows at all."

"Wha-at?" stammered Kate. "Whatever did you say, Ellen?"

Ellen turned calmly to her mistress. "I said my true name is not really Ellen Meadows."

"For heaven's sake, what is your name?" asked Froste.

"Daisy Skelton, sir, Daisy Belle Skelton. The Ellen Meadows thing was just a fancy of Madam's, sir."

In accord Kate, Froste and I gasped amazedly at Ellen's vast unconcern, but if the fantastic declaration surprised Peter, he well concealed his astonishment, and if he knew of Daisy's metamorphosis into Ellen, he well concealed that also.

At last Froste said almost plaintively, "Would you mind telling me what you mean by saying the Ellen Meadows thing was a fancy of Madam's?"

Ellen, however, apparently had gone as far into the matter as she intended going. Plainly she let it be known she considered the affair the concern of Madam Mandrake and herself. She implied that her confidence in her dead mistress was such that, if Madam Mandrake had thought it well for Ellen or Daisy, as the case might be, to swing from Tyburn gallows-tree, Ellen or Daisy would have cheerfully bound hempen rope into a noose and fared forth to hang herself.

Froste, holding the passport almost at arm's length, stared at her in awe. I also stared at her, and seemingly for the first time saw Ellen's cold eye and earnestly set jaw. Then turning my eyes to Peter's mighty bulk and blank face I felt tremors of apprehension wash my spine.

If ever I saw a man presented with something he did not want nor know what to do with, that man was Benjamin Froste. In time he stressed to Ellen the utter necessity of keeping her dual identity secret, and to this, and her attendance at the inquest, she gave ready consent. But when she learned the entire household must absent themselves at the same time a subtle change came over the woman. Without a glance at Peter she addressed me. "May I inquire, sir, if Peter is to attend the inquest?"

"Why, yes, Ellen," I answered. "Unfortunately everyone at Mandrake must attend."

With something of hostility Ellen stared at me and in turn at

Froste and Kate, then turning on abrupt heel she vanished, leaving Froste with mouth agape, and me more disturbed than I would care to admit.

Thereafter for hours on end Kate, Froste and I sought to put together the puzzle that was Ellen Meadows, and we had no luck at all. Froste was all for notifying proper authorities, and having Ellen held for fraudulent entry into the country until such time as she could be returned to England, but wholeheartedly Kate was the woman's champion. As for me, I said neither yea nor nay. Madam Mandrake had trusted me to look after the interest of Peter and Ellen, and as well as I might I would do so; I closed the door of my mind on any adverse thought regarding either or both. But I did wish heartily the asp of doubt would cease thrusting its fangs through the keyhole. Wearily I bade Froste good night and going with Kate into our bedchamber prepared to take Ellen in absentia to bed with me, and Daisy as well, and spent the hours of night wrestling with the nebulous twain. But I did nothing of the sort and it seemed my head scarce touched the pillow when Peter came knuckling the door bearing morning tea.

The inquest was to be at eleven o'clock but long before that hour handsomely clad handmaidens and stablemen were assembled in the kitchen awaiting our permission to depart. In the hall-corridor Kate, Froste, Rosemary York and Miss Tempest also waited with an excited young Stephen, and Miss Sarah snuggled into her rose-coloured blanket, not of course that the latter twain might be expected to give testimony, but the law had been insistent that every soul connected with Mandrake should be present, and so for the nonce Helen's mother would care for our offspring in her own home. In time I gave the word, and handmaidens and stablemen hilariously departed in the long farm waggon drawn by sturdy draught animals, and shortly afterwards Jacob tooled cobs and cart to the door prepared to carry Peter, Rosemary, young Stephen and himself to Van Etten, leaving me to follow in the motorcar with Kate, Froste, Helen Tempest, Ellen and Miss Sarah.

But alas! Ellen turned up missing. I sent Peter to bid her hasten and directly he was back again, to announce lugubriously Ellen was sickened and for her there would be no giving of witness that day. I confess to annoyance and went with Froste to the woman's bedside, seeking to impress her with the necessity of her attendance, and Ellen answered us not at all and stonily turned her face to the wall. Hastily

I rang through to acquaint the law with Mandrake's latest quandary, and the law did not take kindly to my news, grumpily reminding me I had assumed responsibility for the attendance of my household. The unpleasant implication I received was, if a single member of such household failed to put in appearance then I, Stephen Ellers-Mandrake, would certainly be shot at sunrise or thereabouts.

Wearily I laid the telephone on the cradle, wondering morosely what untoward occurrence would next harry me, and immediately tires scoured the driveway and a brace of constables, flanked by Dr. Vanningham in his role of coroner's physician, arrived posthaste. I escorted the good doctor to Ellen and thereafter under the constable's suspicious eye awaited his return, wondering if Vanningham would come forth dragging Ellen by the hair of her stubborn head. When he did come forth it was to pledge his official honour via telephone that at that moment the physical condition of Ellen Meadows warranted her appearance nowhere at all but in her bed.

Thereupon the constables took their turn at the bedside, and unfolding various legal-appearing papers with my assistance and Vanningham's witness, wrote down Ellen's statement that so help her God she had no knowledge whatever of a woman who was indiscreet enough to be found dead in our immediate vicinity.

Then rather sheepishly I assembled my family and followed the constable's motorcar meekly to Van Etten. Upon arrival I found other members of my household huddled together in the corridor of the town hall, patently objects of suspicion to the townsmen, and having aligned myself with the suspects awaited my turn to descend to the temporary morgue and view the rotted flesh which had once been a living woman. Why such thing was needful I did not know unless it was that, by confronting us with the remains of our victim, each or all would be frightened into a gibbering confession of guilt.

Had the body been truly that of Sarah Mandrake no one in the world could testify by merely looking upon it, for there was but scant resemblance to a human being in the sorry flesh lying on the litter in the cellar of Van Etten's morgue. Solemnly each and every one denied possessing any knowledge whatsoever concerning the dead woman, and reascending the dusty stair we were herded into a room directly above where the body lay, and on backless benches awaited the law's pleasure.

I had been somewhat curious regarding the procedure connected with an inquest in the United States, but very shortly indeed I felt my

life could be altogether complete if I knew nothing at all about it. A saturnine gentleman, by name Dr. Horace Glock, was the honourable coroner, and to my mind Dr. Glock seemed to be suffering from an advanced state of jaundice, for everything about him had a decided yellow tinge, including a minute moustache, bushy brows, curling lashes and a lovely head of golden hair well down over his coat collar. Vanningham, cheerful as a kipper, was next in honours and I meditatively decided if I must be convicted of a crime I would vastly prefer to be sentenced cheerily by Vanningham than morosely by Glock. But happily it turned out conviction of crime is not the office of either coroner or coroner's jury.

The vagabond dogs which discovered the body were not present, but seemingly every other body between Albany and Poughkeepsie was, and all ready and willing to tell what they knew of the dead woman and her hidden grave, and always this turned out to be exactly nothing at all. The only persons with anything lucid to impart were two small boys, who, holding aloft their grimy little paws, swore they had heard dogs barking and following the sound found them digging industriously and beheld a partially disinterred body. They'd made off for home and returned with "Paw" and "Grandpaw" and watched them unearth the remainder of the body. "Paw" and "Grandpaw" with superabundant verbosity corroborated the children, and two constables testified they had been summoned by telephone and had also assisted in exhuming the body. And so testified fully a score of honest citizens, until I wondered dazedly where in the world they found space for their labours, for the shallow grave was but a scant yard in breadth and twice that in length.

For aeons we sat cramped and comfortless, listening to stupid and misleading questions, asinine statements and garrulous descriptions. Then the jury withdrew for grave consultation, and when it was done returned and solemnly recommended that one Jacob Schultz be held for questioning by the legal authorities. Before my very eyes I beheld Benjamin Froste go berserk. Tossing judicial etiquette to the wind he arose and howled:

"Over my dead body you'll hold Jake Schultz for questioning."

Came a hiatus in which might be heard stentorian breathing of twelve good men and true, excited shuffling of citizenry, incredulous gasp from the honoured coroner and something which well might be a chuckle from his assistant.

"Identify yourself," requested Dr. Glock tersely.

"You bet your sweet life I'll identify myself," bellowed Benjamin. "My name is Benjamin Froste, I'm Jake Schultz's lawyer, and I want to know on what grounds my client is being held."

"This is very irregular, Mr. Froste," suggested the coroner with a degree of uncertainty.

"You're damned right it's irregular. When it is recommended a citizen of these United States, without a soupçon of evidence against him, be deprived of his liberty, it certainly *is* irregular—and pretty damned irregular at that."

"I meant the approach to this court is irregular."

"O.K. Put one irregularity and another irregularity together and you get two irregularities. What are you going to do about it?"

A dazed expression crept into Glock's bulging eyes. He opened his mouth but no words issued as Benjamin continued to lay his verbal barrage.

"Are you holding Jake Schultz because Sarah Mandrake left him twenty-five thousand dollars?"

"No," said Dr. Glock. "Of course not."

"Well, is it because fifty years ago Jake's pappy owned the land where this woman's body was found?"

The coroner seemed considerably nonplussed. At the moment he was unable to deal adequately with the irate Benjamin, but the citizenry crowding forwards to hear the argument was a horse of another colour.

"This court has adjourned," he squeaked angrily. "Clear the room, officer."

Very reluctantly the balked spectators shuffled off, leaving the jury foreman shifting on uneasy feet and his eleven fellow jurymen shocked into gap-mouthed amazement at antics and clarion crow of doughty Benjamin, who shortly afterwards escorted Jacob, a free man, to Van Etten Inn. Triumphantly reassembling our household we set out for Mandrake, an exciting aura of crime hovering about Jacob's jaunty deerstalker hat.

It was Vanningham's gruesome, if delayed, examination that established the dead woman was not only of shorter stature than the five feet nine inches accredited to Madam Mandrake by her passport, but also that the bones were those of a considerably younger person. So in time, the poor body, still unknown, was committed to decent earth in Van Etten's churchyard, and we who now hold the key to Man-

drake's mystery know that until Judgment Day her slayer will go unpunished.

The dilemma of Jacob Schultz had not troubled Benjamin Froste so greatly as the dilemma of Ellen Meadows. In the time he remained at Mandrake with might and main he sought to wrest from her knowledge of her former life, and reason for her illegal entry into the United States. Ellen, however, was more than his match. What she wished to withhold, she withheld, and as time was to show, this was indeed much.

At length the frustrated gentleman of law betook himself off and we resumed our tranquil mode of life—but not for long.

A second time Kate suffered mysterious illness, to which there had been no preamble. All the day long she had been her cheerful, hearty self. Nevertheless between teatime and dinner I found her unconscious in the upper corridor, midway between our own bedchamber and the Caroline suite. Persons of Kate's abundant health do not usually indulge in vapours, yet twice for no apparent reason she had fallen bereft of her senses. Vanningham's insistence that she again suffered shock did nothing at all to reassure me. A second time he sent Kate to her bed and, perhaps to be quite certain she remained there, brought along a nursing woman to attend her. Doubtless she was a worthy person but also she was a damned nuisance who raised pernicious hell with all and sundry who crossed her path, and had she not bestowed such excellent care on my wife, neck and crop I would have been tempted to toss her from the house.

Peter became the special object of her malice. I am convinced it was altogether to annoy him she daily set about letter-writing in the formal reception room, at the hour he busied himself with dinner preparations in the room adjoining. If ever I knew this person's name I do not recall it, for immediately small Rosemary had naughtily dubbed her "Bouncing Bet," and Bouncing Bet she had remained during her time at Mandrake. But in such time she caused worry enough to do me for a twelvemonth, and worry which for long enough I had to keep to myself.

There was a buhl writing table in the reception room, vastly more ornamental than useful, where the woman persisted in doing up her correspondence. Shortly before she went from Mandrake, as she sat at her scribbling, I heard something of a racket and Bouncing Bet appeared before me holding bits of a broken drawer in her hand. Some-

what brusquely I pointed out that there were a half-dozen writing tables scattered throughout the house which she might have very well used, and there was no reason why she should have chosen the fragile table in the reception room. Rather sullenly I began fitting the bits together, but my effort was of little use and after the woman had betaken herself off I thrust the broken drawer into place, determined to lock the thing until I could come upon a proper cabinet-maker to repair it. It was the first time ever I closely scanned the little table, inlaid and ornamented no end, with a dozen small cabinets and drawers lined in faded velvet and permeated with faint musky odour.

For a little I sat admiring it, recalling silly old tales of fortunes hidden in secret hideaways, and perhaps such flight of fancy was my reason for beginning to finger and press inlays and carvings. But not a button or lever could I come upon, and I gave over my romancing and began to search for the key. Below the writing portion were two long shallow drawers, and in the lower I found the missing key, and found also, under the lining, a protuberance so slight I was not at all sure it was really there. Removing the drawer altogether, I carried it to the window for better lighting and beheld a paper packet held by strips of adhesive to the riser. Even in my excitement I noticed the adhesive was clean and new. But before I had opportunity to scan its contents Peter announced dinner. I bore the packet to my writing table and turned the key on it, and it was not until the day following I had leisure and opportunity to look into my find.

If ever a man chanced upon a veritable Pandora's box I did! In the packet were two envelopes, one containing clippings from various British newsprints of the arrest and conviction of Daisy Skelton for willful murder, and the second, Daisy's certificate of dismissal from gaol at the end of ten years.

It was an altogether ghastly experience. The suspicions of the Van Etten constabulary regarding the questionable circumstances of Sarah Mandrake's death began to take on reality. Undoubtedly Daisy Skelton's crime was the answer to the fictitious passport, but according to Ellen—or Daisy—the passport was altogether the idea of Madam Mandrake. If this were truth, then Madam Mandrake must have been altogether cognizant of Ellen's character and crime. Had Ellen lied by the clock in claiming such was the case, or had she perhaps blackmailed Madam Mandrake into securing the passport for her? Who had secreted the papers in the writing table? If it was Ellen.

surely there must have been a dozen nooks and crannies in the north addition where such papers would have been nearer to hand, and a great deal safer.

Was it Madam Mandrake who, suspecting Ellen of ill intent towards her, had retained evidence of her crime as a Sword of Damocles, or was it Peter who, for some obtuse purpose of his own, had hidden the records of Ellen's wrongdoing? No theory which I brought forwards was satisfying or sensible. The more I brooded the more confused I became, and had I weighed and considered the remainder of my life I would never have chanced upon the simple solution of the hidden packet. Needless to say, when such solution came it was not of my doing. With the regularity of my daily prayers I again and again scanned clippings and dismissal certificate and made no more of them than I did the first time ever I laid eyes upon them. And then to my utter consternation one morning when I unlocked the drawer the packet had vanished, and there was nothing I could do other than obtusely and unavailingly question Peter, Ellen and every other member of the staff who had access to the library. Nor in the sorry days of Kate's second bout with ill health was this the only matter which was to disturb me. For once more I laid eyes on something for which there could be no logical explanation.

I would take solemn oath in the broad light of day a brace of shadowy dogs went leaping up the stair before me. As clearly as I heard the stroke of the corridor clock I heard the scratch of their nails on the wood, saw their friendly wagging tails and their lolling red, moist tongues—and clung to the banister trembling and frightened lest I had at last gone mad. In the streamlined, gadget-ridden era when a finger flick brings chill or heat, music from countless miles away or a voice speaking over the telephone from one of the four corners of the earth, in this new age to consider for a moment that phantom beasts roamed Mandrake House was fair witless. Yet I could not fend off the conviction that the painted dogs had left their frame over the dining-room manteltree to frolic before my very eyes, and of such conviction I was ashamed. . . . But in time I was to harbour in my mind many things which sane man has neither right nor reason to believe.



CHAPTER SEVEN

YOUNG STEPHEN had been vastly interested at the seemingly unheralded appearance of Miss Sarah. Time had not at all abated his curiosity and, during his mother's second illness when his unceasing quest for knowledge had become altogether a nuisance, I decided perhaps a man-to-man chat dealing with the general aspects of birth might very well loosen the lad's tension and make end to his insistent demands for information. With this in view I invited Stephen to take tea with me, and as we sat beside the library hearth, two grave men delving into the metaphysical aspects of creation, the lad, looking up from his cambric cup, spread from ear to ear his sudden and charming grin, and said cheerily, "Hel-loo!"

As this was his usual greeting to Peter I looked for Peter to appear, then became conscious Stephen's gaze was directed not towards the door through which he would naturally approach but at a spot beyond it and to the left. At the lad's continued expression of delight I had the trying sensation that someone was standing at my shoulder, and this, added to Stephen's grimacing caused me to contemplate bounding from my chair, grasping my son by the hand and hastily going elsewhere. But I did nothing, and after a bit Stephen waved a careless fist, remarked Britishly, "Tootle-oo, old chap," and then in his best United-Statesese, "Be seein' yah," and got on with his tea drinking.

For long enough I sat studying my son, wondering if his antics were merely mischief or if he had truly beheld something hidden from my sight. From some dim pocket of mind I drew legend that those of unsullied heart and pure intent might see and hold converse with beings from another sphere. But on the other hand I myself had beheld phantom dogs, and not by the greatest stretch of imagination

could my weather-beaten old heart be thought unsullied. As for my pure intent, that was entirely as may be, or mayhap phantom dogs were in different category and therefore might be looked upon by those whose attributes were somewhat doubtful.

I did not consider it wise to attach importance to Stephen's mental gymnastics, but curiosity got the better of good sense and I asked casually to whom he had spoken. He answered rather surprisedly, "The man. Didn't you see him?" And when I said I had not he appeared so confused I said no more of the matter. Having done with his tea, Stephen evinced no more interest in my chat, and directly went forth to seek Rosemary, but his hail and farewell to his misty pal remained behind to disturb me.

That night when Peter brought my doch-and-dorrach I spoke to him of Stephen's hallucination, and so emphatically did Peter attribute the affair to childish mischief I began to wonder if Peter also knew that Mandrake harboured those for whom I had no welcome.

In time I had another fantastic incident to consider. Kate was still partially bed-bound, and I, vastly bored with too much of my own company, was pleased when she suggested I vary my lone dining by inviting Helen Tempest to be my guest. If I remember correctly this was on the fourth evening after the strange occurrence in the library. At table I made belated discovery that Tempest *père* had been for many years headmaster at Van Etten's secondary school. His sires had been among the first settlers in the Hudson Valley, and legends and chronicles of Dutchess County were as familiar to her as her prayers. In avid hunger for knowledge of those whose lives in any manner touched the Mandrake family, I set about picking the girl's mind of what she knew concerning residents of town and village adjacent to Mandrake.

As we sat chattering industriously over our coffee Stephen's bed-hour arrived and he descended for his protracted good-night embraces. But no sooner had he entered the dining room when his gamin grin again spread from ear to ear, and he stood gazing happily towards a spot which to my uneasy eye seemed altogether vacant. Somewhat sharply I spoke to him. As he turned reluctantly to me he called out his familiar, "Be seein' yah," then, directing me in Americanese to "shove over, Pop," he climbed on the chair beside me.

Again I casually inquired to whom he had spoken and as before received the reply, "The man." Pointing a small finger towards the

portrait of Stephen over the mantelshelf he emphasized, "*That man*," and added that he liked him and liked his dogs too. Then dropping the subject he began recital of the day's doings. At Rosemary's appearance the lad as usual almost strangled me with the ardour of his embrace and, with a more formal adieu to Helen Tempest, went his way. Until the door of his bedchamber shut out the sound, we heard him chattering cheerfully.

On impulse I turned to the serene woman sitting opposite to me and said, "I'm a bit troubled over young Stephen. What did you make of his gyrations a moment ago?"

"As you must know, Stephen is an unusually imaginative child, Mr. Mandrake. I'm not presuming to advise, but were he my son I'd let his actions go unheeded."

Abruptly I asked, "Do you believe in ghosts?"

For a long moment she did not answer. Then she said: "In this country the term 'ghost' covers everything from a small boy done up in a Hallowe'en false face to table-tipping, and includes a great deal of nonsense between. Certain sorts of 'ghosts' I very much believe in. For example, if one commits a grievous act the memory of it might very well be considered a ghost returning to haunt one's conscience. The same is true of remembered kindness. The first is an unpleasant ghost, the other a heart-warming one."

"There's substance to what you say, of course. However, it wasn't this sort of ghost I had in mind."

She smiled. "What sort *did* you have in mind?"

"It's difficult to find words for it. Perhaps I mean the old-fashioned variety of spectre, complete with groans, winding sheet and so forth."

Again she smiled, but she made no attempt at answering and, realizing I was coyly playing a verbal game of ring-around-a-rose and getting nowhere with it, I blurted: "Have you ever felt there was something awry in this house?"

"Unlike Stephen, I am not an imaginative person, Mr. Mandrake. One who makes nursing her profession may not be, and at any rate I doubt the wisdom of even discussing the possibilities of such things." And having finished her coffee and declined a liqueur, Helen Tempest went abovestairs, leaving me feeling very much snubbed and altogether at wits' end.

Later that evening I again sought to wrest from Peter whatever he might know of Mandrake's unwelcome guests, but from a hard and

blank surface he batted my questions back to me and gave impression that, like the monkeys of Japan, he had never in his life seen, heard or spoken to phantoms, and if the matter was left to him, he was not going to do so. On the next day, adroitly I sought to question Ellen along the same lines and had no better luck. Indeed, despite my knowledge of the woman's questionable past, when the interview was done, having been firmly put in my place, I was altogether abashed and apologetic. Nevertheless, for all the disavowals and evasions of various Mandrake inmates, occurrences falling far short of reasonable explanation continued to present themselves for solution.

At the time of Kate's confinement I had begun reluctant occupancy of the Caroline suite, for the bedchambers on the entire south side of the corridor had been given over to the necessities of Miss Sarah's arrival. I write "reluctant occupancy" meaning the uttermost the words imply, for never did I step foot in the place without experiencing a sensation of chilliness and dread, and were it possible for space and inanimate objects to die, then I would write this place down as dead. For a long fortnight I spent my nights in Caroline's great tester bed, and if I slept or did not sleep, arose each morning so spent and weary indeed it required vast effort to rise at all. Sleeping, my dreams were of houris, who teased and bedevilled me. If I lay wakeful I was sure and certain I was not alone in the chamber, often enough that I was not alone in the bed, and truly I did not know what to do, for to flee the suite was tacit confession there was something awry, and it was no time to trouble Kate with whimsy. But Kate has since told me she sensed my distress, and for this reason avowed need of my company and coaxed me to sleep on the great couch between the north windows of our bedchamber. Sleep there I did until her second illness, when Bouncing Bet, insisting that in ministering to her patient she had need to be in the immediate vicinity, without so much as "by your leave" appropriated my bed. Then I went again, and reluctantly, to lie in the Caroline suit, and the gruesome sensations began all over again.

I think it was the second evening after Bet had taken herself off that, frail and lovely in a lacy gown, Kate descended to dine with me and, making something of a gala of the occasion, we invited Helen and Rosemary to dine also and together made merry at expense and idiosyncrasies of the absent Bet. But Helen had been insistent we cut our skylarking short, so that Kate might go early to bed, and the cor-

ridor clock had not yet struck ten when the ladies ascended. A bit somnolent over a liqueur or two, I lingered on for the better portion of an hour, then, yawningly choosing a volume to take with me, I too went abovestairs. For a moment I peeped in on young Stephen snug asleep in the corner chamber, chatted briefly with Rosemary at her threshold, crossed the corridor for a proud glimpse at my cherubic daughter, and though I knew such act would be decried by all and sundry, I could not resist impulse to tippy-toe towards small Sarah's basket and touch my lips to the petal-like digits curled so cunningly above her head. And from thence went for a chat with Kate, lingering until I was driven forth by the tyrannical Helen.

I have written these fairly uninteresting things only as criterion of the doings of a normal person, for certainly I was a normal person until the door of the Caroline Phillips chamber closed behind me. Thereafter it would be far-fetched indeed to consider me anything of the sort. Immediately and for no good reason on earth my teeth set up a chattering, my knees struck one against the other, my hands trembled as though stricken with a palsy. I had a most unseemly impulse to dash from the cursed place and like Danny the dachshund cower beneath anything handy. With might and main I took myself to task, in time succeeded in minimizing my fears and began stoic preparation for bed, but, arrant coward that I had become, left my door on the crack that I might hearken to Kate's and Helen's chat, to the plaintive wail of Miss Sarah and to Peter drawing house-bolts which might very well on some far-fled day have secured the same doors against marauding redskins. So heartening were the sounds that my uneasiness fled me and I settled into the huge bed, further solaced by pipe and book, and shortly was asleep. I do not know how long I slept or what awakened me, but waken I did, with full conviction I had been returned to conscious living by other than natural means.

I had the most definite urge possible towards action, though what action I did not at all know. When I had fallen asleep the lamp at my bedside was still alight. As I sat among the covers striving to set muddled wit in order, the light dimmed slowly and vanished altogether, leaving me in Stygian darkness. Before I could swing my fear-halted limbs over the bedside the lamp gleamed anew and then dimmed and vanished a second time. Thrice did this occur while I sought to reach a palsied hand towards the wall button. Then for breathless aeons I waited until light from the chandelier flooded the bedchamber.

As Heaven is my judge, beside me in that cursed bed lay a woman enticing as a houri, lovely as a dream. I could not move, and to my shame confess I did not want to move. More than ever I had desired anything did I desire to draw the breath-taking devil into my arms, fondle the scented auburn hair curling over my pillow, fasten greedy mouth on the smiling red lips. And always I shall wonder a little what would have happened to me if I had done so. But I did not. Instead I tumbled, quilts and all, out on the floor and sat helplessly tangled in the eiderdown.

As I floundered about, the corridor clock slowly struck three, and the woman on the bed faded and vanished until only lustful, enticing eyes remained staring at me from the pillow. Then they also were gone and I, as if released from some dread spell, thrust gown and house boots under my arm and crept on hands and knees into the corridor. There I gained my feet and closed the door behind me, confusedly donned my garments and, gnawing my knuckles, stood wondering what in the world to do next. I avow had I given free play to my limbs undoubtedly I would have galloped into Kate's bedchamber and very possibly crawled under her bed. Dreadfully I craved a monstrous tot of brandy to cosset shattered nerves, but not for the wealth of the Indies would I have descended the long and lonely stair with hazard of meeting a second time the brace of phantom dogs. It seemed to me one phantom a night was all that a man could reasonably be expected to tolerate. Suddenly remembering that during Kate's illness a brandy bottle had stood on a table in the passageway between her bedchamber and the one occupied by Helen Tempest, I cogitated if it was still there-and, if so, would it be more expedient to seek such bottle by way of Kate's chamber or Helen's. But I was reluctant to try one road or the other, for I was quite certain if anyone at all screamed even one small scream I would immediately become a candidate for Bedlam.

At length deciding of the two Kate would be less easily awakened, I opened her door softly. In the moonlight streaming through her window lay my dear wife sleeping, her cheek bolstered on a pretty arm, an excellent panacea for whimsy. Quickly I became dauntless. Grinning fatuously at utter idiocy of what I assured myself was no more than a nightmare, I decided to descend belowstairs, swill enough brandy to cause me to stay valiant, and then, if the woman returned and persisted in sharing my couch I would virtuously and sternly bid her be gone to find a more appreciative bedfellow. Who was afraid

of ghosts, anyway? Surely not I, Stephen Mandrake, who when he sought to knot the string of his robe found he had donned it inside out, and moreover whose left house boot was on the right foot and vice versa. Sheepishly I put myself to rights, a bit regretful I had not borne my consoling pipe from the vicinity of the questionable lady. Then, sane and shamefaced, I strode towards the stairhead.

To this day I do not know why I paused at the door of Miss Sarah's nursery, but pause I did and opened the door quietly. Here also moonlight flooded floor furnishings and the befurbeled basket where scant hours before I had kissed the hand of my sleeping babe. But now the basket was altogether empty! This fact alone should not have caused the devilish fear that engulfed me. There were many logical reasons for the child's absence. Nevertheless, I crossed the chamber to lay soft knuckles hastily on Helen Tempest's door. When she opened to me I directed her attention in dumb show to the empty basket. Quickly she searched among the blankets, thrust the basket from position, scanned the floor beneath, then wordlessly turned back into her own bedchamber. I sensed rather than heard her speed along the passageway, perhaps in forlorn hope Kate herself had taken the child to nurse. But well I knew Kate's arms, wholly visible in the moonlight, held no child. Immediately Helen was back again. To my unspoken question she shook negative head, then motioned me into the corridor where, well removed from Kate's vicinity, we held toneless consultation.

"When did you last see the baby?" I whispered. Helen glanced at her watch. "She had her feeding three hours ago."

"You haven't seen her since?"

"It's never been necessary to check on her. From the final night feeding to the first one in the morning she sleeps quietly."

For a long moment we regarded each other. Then Helen asked curiously, "How did you happen into the nursery at this hour?"

"For heaven's sake," I told her, "let us not waste precious time on chat. I *did* pop in. The baby's gone. We've got to do something about it."

"What shall we do?" she asked.

I did not know, but turned back again to the nursery. Helen, following after, closed the doors into the passage and mid-corridor, and when I had turned on all available lights we searched the room's every nook and cranny. Why we did so neither of us knew, for surely an infant counting its life by weeks could not of its own volition stray

from its bed. In the almost non-existent possibility that Rosemary had removed the child, I roused her. Of course she had not, but, remembering young Stephen's mischievous secreting of the dachshund, suggested he might well have borne his sister into his bed. There was nothing in Stephen's bed save himself, nor was there aught unusual in the chamber where he lay.

A dreadful word teased me, a word whispered to frantic parents on a long-ago night in the New Jersey hills. The name "Mandrake" had long been associated with wealth. Tales of the fabulous legacy bequeathed me by Sarah Mandrake were rife, and, to those concerned with the loathsome trade of kidnapping, wealth was Alpha and Omega.

Leaving Rosemary and Helen to their fruitless search, I fled belowstairs and rang through to the constabulary office. The calm, if ridiculous, reply to my demand for their immediate presence, "O.K., buddy, keep your shirt on. We're on our way," was vastly reassuring.

From the telephone I went to beat impatient tattoo on the door to the north addition. Time seemed unending until I heard Peter's deliberately descending feet. When he drew bolt I flung such a fury of questions at him he stood blinking and bemused. "I'm sorry, sir," he said. "I'm afraid I do not quite understand."

"The baby, Peter!" I croaked. "The baby is missing. Do you or Ellen know anything of her?"

The man's huge body began to tremble like an aspen. Colour drained from his face, and for a long moment I thought he was about to faint. "Miss Sarah, sir?" he whispered. "Miss Sarah is not in the nursery?"

"Neither in the nursery nor any place in the house," I told him and waited breathlessly for what he had to say. But despite his obvious anxiety, Peter vowed neither he nor Ellen had knowledge of the vanished baby.

"Get dressed quickly," I bade him, "and tell Ellen to dress. The constables will be here immediately. They'll want everyone about."

Then with what speed trembling limbs could muster I again went abovestairs. "Get the servants down here," I told Rosemary, and heavy-hearted went to awaken Kate, but Kate, already awakened, was fumbling for her bed boots.

"Whatever is the row, Stephen?" she asked. "Why is everyone rushing about so?"

I drew her down beside me on the tumbled bed and sought fran-

tically for the least alarming words at my command to tell her of Sarah's disappearance.

"Don't dither, Stephen," she said sharply. "Tell me what's up."

"Kate," I faltered, "Kate . . ." I could not get on with it. Flinging the door wide, I called Helen and gave her my sorry task.

In the mid-corridor Peter had already questioned the servants and found, as I expected, they swore they had nothing to reveal. I too questioned them and before I had done lights pierced the darkness of the lane and shortly came the welcome *rat-a-tat* of the law on Mandrake's door. As Peter descended to open to them, Ellen, calm and correct in every last item of her servant's garb, passed him in ascent, so it was the entire household who awaited the law's behest. Gratefully I noted that the constables appeared to be brisk, intelligent and of entirely different kidney from the twain who hitherto had visited Mandrake.

Without preamble I began, "My infant daughter is missing——"

The senior of the constables said, "I take it you are Mr. Mandrake."

I answered that I was. He then asked the identity of each person present. When he had sifted wheat from chaff, he issued instructions that no one was to leave Mandrake House and sent the junior constable with the staff to the kitchen. He then suggested that Peter, Ellen and I go with him to the chamber where my poor Kate and Helen Tempest awaited us. "We can talk just as well sitting down," announced the constable. Peter and Ellen ignored his suggestion and stood pale and tense beside the door. Rosemary and Helen sat unhappily on the couch, while I drew Kate into the circle of my arm.

For a bit the room was silent while the man of law intently regarded us one and all. His scrutiny done, he turned to me and said, "In a case of this kind time counts. Suppose you begin, Mr. Mandrake. Make it brief as you can but tell me exactly what happened. Search your memory for anything which might have bearing on the child's disappearance."

I told what I could recall from the moment I stepped into the mid-corridor.

The constable, floundering in my wash of words, turned again and again to Helen for explanation or confirmation. "What awakened you?" he asked.

I still had wit enough to realize if I told him a lovely redheaded

witch had nuzzled me in my bed I'd doubtless straightway be borne to gaol or to Bedlam, so I answered that I did not quite know what had awakened me.

"Are you accustomed to visiting the child at night?" he next inquired.

"I never did before."

"Why did you tonight?"

"I'm sure I do not know. I was going belowstairs and took a notion to glance in on her."

"Why were you going down at that hour?"

With a sheepish glance at Kate I made a clean breast of it. "For a brandy and soda," I told him valiantly.

The constable nodded and thereafter regarded me with more benign eye. He turned to Helen. "Can you add anything to what Mr. Mandrake has told me?" he asked her.

Helen shook her head. "No," she said, "I can't."

"How about you, Rosemary?"

But Rosemary also had nothing to add, while I, in the very midst of heartbreak, was thankful we lived adjacent to Van Etten where butcher, baker and candlestick-maker having been nippers together were loyal one to the other, and if one befriended you the rest would follow their fashion. I knew well enough that Rosemary and Helen having taken us to heart, whatever lay in their power to do, their fellow townsmen would do for me and for my family.

It might well be Jacob's nose for trouble which roused and brought him to Mandrake, or it might have been sound of the constable's motorcar. At any rate, after he too had had a thorough going-over, he was told off to assist in a second search of Mandrake House. Our combined efforts brought nothing to light. Doors and windows bore mark of neither entrance nor exit. Lock and bolt were as Peter had left them scant hours before. As puzzled as they were, we trailed after the constables to the mid-floor to assist them in a minute scrutiny of it, and in like manner we prowled the attic floor from one corner to the other. Stephen, awakened, was borne to his mother for her gentle questioning, his bed was uptossed, wardrobe, chests and play-boxes were turned out without a single helpful thing come upon.

When all of the house proper had been given a thorough going-over I went with the senior constable to unlock the door into the south addition, but search as we would there was no trace of the

missing infant; nor was there in the north addition, which with Peter we thoroughly explored.

Then behind the closed doors of the library I listened to Helen brief a description of small Sarah to be telephoned to the constabulary office in preparation for broadcasting throughout the country.

"Any identifying marks?" asked the constable with poised pencil.

"Small red birth cicatrix under hairline above left temple. Oblong nevus on right scapula. Hair light blonde; eyes blue; darker spots on iris."

I peered at Helen in amazed admiration. To me Miss Sarah was the epitome of adorable babyhood, but never did I know of cicatrix or nevus, nor did I know she nightly slept in bedgown and vest "with blue silk edging" knitted by her mother, a bellyband and a brace of diapers. I am indeed grateful to write that never did the intimacies of Miss Sarah's person and wardrobe become public property.

It was Kate's quick ear that first caught the shrill complaining wail. "Stephen!" she called excitedly. "Hearken, Stephen!"

In mid-corridor I stood stock-still and hearkened as she bade me do. I also heard the wail, as did Rosemary, Helen and the senior constable. In high confusion each scurried in a different direction—I, God knows why, towards the cursed Caroline suite. No sooner had I opened the door when a stable fact was borne on me. In flight from my untoward bedfellow I had left the chamber alight, and alight it had been each time we searched it. Now it was dark as a pocket.

Quickly I set the chandelier aglow. At first glance the chamber seemed as I had left it. Carafe and glass were in their usual place. Beside them my book lay face-down on the table. The eiderdown that had tumbled with me from bed to floor was there still, and the pipe I had hastily thrust aside lay among the covers. But incredibly among the covers was an angrily weeping baby wrapped in a strange motley shawl!

For a second time that night I was certain I suffered chimera. Shouting incoherently, I gathered child and shawl in my arms and sped to Kate. But it was Helen Tempest who took the babe from me. Placing her on her mother's knee she hastily disrobed her to search for possible hurt, while Miss Sarah, perhaps content with the furor she had created, abruptly stilled her doleful wailing, smiled cherubically, thrust a minute thumb in her mouth and was instantly asleep.

From the threshold Mandrake's household, plus two constables, grinned ecstatically at the rosy, naked baby.

"O.K., Helen?" inquired the senior constable.

"O.K., Jerry," answered Helen.

But the casual "O.K.'s" were not enough to satisfy Peter. "May I inquire if Miss Sarah is quite all right, sir?" he asked.

"I think so, Peter," I answered. "Send everyone along to bed, please. See to it that Ellen goes also. You too, Peter."

But Peter had his own ideas of what was due Mandrake's hospitality. "It's been a rather tiring night, sir. May I suggest coffee?"

I turned to the constables. "Would you care for coffee?" I asked. When they had accepted, I folded the strange shawl over my arm and went with them belowstairs. "What do you make of all this?" I asked worriedly.

My question was answered by another. "What do you, Mr. Mandrake?" grinned the senior.

"I'm too bedazed to know. However, I assure you it is the most amazing thing I ever experienced."

"Sure you didn't take the baby into your bed and forget about it?"

"Most certainly I did not."

"I've known such a thing to happen."

"Perhaps so," I said, "but how do you explain the shawl? You heard the servants say they did not recognize it, did you not?"

"Sure I did," said the junior, "and I heard Rosemary, Helen and every man jack swear they never saw it before in their lives. But that's tonight; tomorrow, when the excitement has died down, somebody's going to remember who it belongs to and how come it got wrapped around the baby."

I turned to the senior. "You searched the chamber where the child was found, did you not?"

He appeared a bit uncomfortable. "Why, yes," he said, "I did."

"More than once?"

"I believe I went in there three or four times."

"And each time you overlooked the child?"

He shrugged. "Could be. I was excited and maybe hurried a little more than necessary. It might have been asleep and sort of mixed up with the covers."

I gave over trying to convince anyone Miss Sarah had been removed and spent hours of night in alien hands. When Peter brought coffee and sandwiches I fell on them hungrily as did the constables. Then they betook themselves off, leaving behind such aroma of incredulity that, had I not the bright shawl as evidence of the night's fantastic

happenings, I am not at all sure I would not have come to believe with them I had stupidly been the cause of Miss Sarah vanishing.

It was full dawn before I again heard official tires in the lane. I did not seek my unholy bed, but sat touching the heavy silk with exploring fingers, twisting it this way and that, wondering what in the world it recalled to mind. It was a huge affair, fully three yards square, having a border of long knitted fringe, both fringe and basic hue deep crimson, but the silk was so embroidered in flower, leaf, scroll, tiny birds, and in shades and tints of yellow, green and blue, it gave impression of being fashioned of variegated silk. It was a costly thing, such as a woman of the Edwardian era might cherish. Almost I convinced myself it seemed familiar because I had beheld similar ones wrapped about the patrician shoulders of the Duchess of Hone. But such are the vagaries of the human mind, no sooner had I recalled the tall spare form of my great-aunt when another tall, spare form flashed into my mind. At once I knew the silk I held in my hands had been folded about the shoulders of the wraithlike woman of the mid-corridor, and such conviction brought me no tranquillity at all.

For me vastly unhappy days followed. With the secret of Ellen's crime and that of the disturbing shawl locked in my breast, I felt a good deal of sympathy for the small Spartan chap concealing the fox beneath his waistcoat. But it was difficult to continue to be morose, for Kate's buoyant health increased by leaps and bounds; Miss Sarah, taking no hurts from her vanishment, flourished like the proverbial green bay tree; and young Stephen thrived like a veritable weedling, day by day becoming more comically Americanized. He had made no more mention of his spectral friend. For the nonce we were at peace.

At first in curtailed forays, but as time went on venturing farther afield, I rode with Kate through the October-mellowed beauty of the Hudson Valley. Often, our saddlebags laden with provender, we turned the horses' heads towards outlying hills and picnicked on sunny slopes violently bedecked by thickets of scarlet and purple sumac. Far away the Hudson rippled like a silver ribbon in the sun, and translucent clouds rolled lazily over the Catskill Mountains or sped across a cobalt sky before briskly teasing winds. Quail whistled from wheat fields, partridge drummed from timber edge, and often as we sat quiet wild creatures stole out from their hideaways. Sly red foxes forged misleading trails in tall grass. Brown hares and their

bolder rabbit brethren scurried and scampered at our very feet. Squirrels chattered busily in their unceasing foraging for winter-hoarded nuts. Wise-appearing, bespectacled raccoons crept about their particular errands. And more than once we beheld doe or buck silhouetted against the autumn sky.

On a mount got from God knows where, now and again Jacob Schultz kept us company, precariously balanced on the saddle, his peg leg entirely free of the stirrup. Nevertheless Jacob could and did leap hedge and ditch as cleanly as Kate, valiant horsewoman that she is. But I leaped nothing at all and jogged in their wake vastly content I was sturdy enough to bestride a horse in comfort and pleasure. It was Jacob who showed to us secret and lovely paths and lanes leading north, south, east and west. We learned from him also many a quaint tale and legend of the Hudson Valley, equalling or even surpassing those written by Irving.

But in time the cresset fires of autumn burned low, our halcyon days were done, trouble came again to Mandrake House, and it would seem that forever we were to live our lives in broad stripes of peace and chaos. October had marched to an ending of crisp beauty on the Eve of All Hallows. It was vastly comic to remember that until I was a well-grown lad I truly believed that on this one night of the year dead men arose and in their winding sheets walked the earth. Always I was torn between terror of chancing upon a perambulating spirit and vexation that try as I might I never once beheld a glimpse of a ghostly robe, or sniffed the dank and mouldy odours of the grave.

On such day a twelvemonth past Sarah Mandrake had vanished. I found myself wishing, if the dead truly returned to earth, on this night the shade of the strange woman would bear me company for whatever time as was necessary to read me the riddle of Mandrake House. But if the dead walked the earth that night they trod softly or kept altogether far and wide from my immediate vicinity. Or perhaps it was that Mandrake's were patrician phantoms who did not haunt in proper season or in company of lesser ghosts.

Winter came early that year. Great gales blew down in icy blasts from the hills and tore about Mandrake's eaves in tympanic violence, but winter brought its own wild loveliness in the white-capped river beating in frenzy against the cliffs and at flood tide strumming weird melodies in its wash over the ruins of the ancient brickkilns on its

bank. Overnight Mandrake Wood was stripped of its frost-browned foliage, its trees rendered bleak skeletons against the chill November moon. Sparkling opaque ice encrusted river sedges and terrace stones, and under their drapery of snow sentinel pines at wood's edge stood proudly gilded by wan winter sun. The day long, fires blazed on Mandrake's many hearths, tended and replenished by Jacob Schultz, his dangling summer waistcoat hidden under a snug fleece-lined jacket. Indoors and out, his hairless poll was forever crowned by a raffish fur cap; the path of his labours marked by the tap-tap of a wooden leg and the creaking sole of his single laced boot. Many times, beholding the industry of Jacob Schultz, I found it incredible that one who was master of many a sound United States dollar should make no use of them at all and from dawn to dark assiduously pursue self-appointed tasks. Incredible also that Peter and Ellen should so labour, for had they chosen to do so they might have lived at ease in a climate far more salubrious than that of Dutchess County. Why the trio should continue to be fast bound to Mandrake House I did not know, but in time to come, though I could point no accusing finger at any or all, the lingering of these strange and wary souls seemed to be of sinister intent.



CHAPTER EIGHT

BEFORE she had quite arrived at her fourth month Miss Sarah had become a personage. In the infancy of Stephen I had known little of him for, in the beginning of England's war, periods of liberty given to those in the Flying Corps had been few. Perhaps it was because I saw vastly more of Miss Sarah than ever I had of Stephen that my minute daughter held a more generous corner of my heart than her brother. And to the amusement of Kate, of my own will—and deftly—I often enough exchanged Miss Sarah's moist tricornered breeches for tricornered breeches of dryer condition, and flicked a powder puff expertly over a small pink posterior. But had such thing been suggested during Stephen's infancy I would have considered my personal dignity insulted, and that of the entire British Flying Corps as well.

To our great content Helen Tempest showed no intent to depart from our household and in my disturbed frame of mind I found her large presence comforting. For no good reason on earth she called to mind the great crucifix carved into the ancient door of Ellersly Hall, supposedly as protection against the powers of darkness in the day when Britain was ruled by a Catholic king and Ellersly Hall was fief to a Catholic lord. Rather mischievously I wondered what Helen's reaction would be to suggestion that she in any manner resembled the trappings of Popery, for in practise and conviction the family of Tempest are militant and perhaps bigoted followers of Martin Luther.

November month had arrived doleful and drizzly, though there were consoling stretches of handsome brisk weather, but regardless of what each day brought forth Kate and I did not permit ourselves to be housebound. Come ill wind or good we fared forth—one mile, two

miles, three—increasing our range as we became immune to chill. In time we made little of adventuring on a brisk five-mile jaunt between luncheon and tea, and there were few hills and dales around and about Mandrake that did not know our exploring feet. Once all unwittingly we came upon the shallow grave from which the unknown woman's body had been uncovered, no one at all having taken time or trouble to level or erase it.

So dreary a grave it was, among the wilderness of shrivelled weeds and stubble that had once been a cherished garden. The glassless windows of the crumbling farm dwelling grinned vacantly above it very like to a gap-toothed skull. Who was the woman, we wondered, and why had she been slain? It was long enough before we were to know.

In mid-November the kennels again wrote, asking what disposal was to be made of the quartette of spaniels I had purchased, and with the sorry fate of Danny Dachshund in mind I did not at all know what to do. At the moment Mandrake was at peace. The sharp edge of Miss Sarah's vanishing had worn somewhat blunt. Kate and I had altogether given over discussion of the mystery, and almost I could convince myself phantom dogs and spectral woman were but figments of a troubled mind. But I had come to believe that anything at all might happen at Mandrake House, and in time I knew that anything at all generally did. I have hitherto set down that I have never been addicted to the recording of daily events, for according to my philosophy the pleasant and satisfactory days of one's life are never forgotten, and days which are neither one nor the other are better so. Nevertheless I continued to write of unusual events, and on November twelfth wrote down the arrival of three golden, one altogether sooty spaniel. To our amusement our vastly Americanized son, casting aside patrician kennel names, christened the golden trio Eeny, Meeny and Miney, and the black fellow Mo, and to this day Eeny, Meeny and Miney answer to their silly monikers, but poor Mo answers to nothing at all, having given his all too brief life in our service.

The next notation is written in patent amazement. It reads, "To-day Peter and Ellen were married," and is followed by exclamation points and question marks. Perhaps to anyone aside from my family the marriage of a seemingly stodgy mid-aged butler to an entirely unromantic housekeeper also of mid-age would seem unworthy of being recorded as an unusual event. But to me, with Ellen's crime

locked in my breast, the event was terrifying. Suppose the woman was addicted to slaying the males of her family, and Peter would spend his wedding night with a throat cut from ear to ear! I began cogitating as to Ellen's preferred method of doing to death. The faded clippings had not stated how she had slain her sire, or had they? In my confused state of mind I could not remember. Had she used poison? A bullet? Had she strangled him with an apron string or burnt him to a crisp on the hearth? Was it my duty to forbid the banns, and if so by what method? Should I wait until the parson requested information as to reasons why Ellen Meadows should not wed Peter Petralsky and then stepping forwards, keeping a wary eye on the bride, brightly suggest Ellen Meadows could not possibly wed Peter Petralsky because there was no such person as Ellen Meadows? And, furthermore, what woman hath done woman might very well do again, and if Peter persisted in his daring experiment he might find himself entirely without breath and Mandrake find itself without a butler. But, dallier that I am, I did nothing at all.

Regardless of alarm that, once wed, Peter and Ellen would forsake Mandrake House, Kate was charmed with the idea of a wedding. She began feverishly to plan a dignified ceremony in the drawing room with Ellen blushing beneath her veil, and I in loco-parental capacity giving the bride away. I threw no stone in the way, though I very much doubted Ellen's ability to accomplish anything in the blushing line. And as for giving the bride away, I was quite sure if ever I did there would be no wedding; even so doughty a groom as Peter might be shy of taking to wife one somewhat given to murder.

Shortly after dinner on November fourteenth Peter asked my august consent to his marriage, and reluctantly enough I gave it. But when, on the following morning, after first delicately coughing behind two fingers to attract my attention, he informed me the nuptials would take place at eleven of the clock on the same day, I was fair bewildered. It seemed to me after dwelling side by side for decades there was no need for the great hurry—or was there? It was perhaps my last opportunity to save the life of a brother and a butler, but knavishly I said naught and got on with my munching, and in time quite staggered up the stair to tell Kate what was immediately going forwards. Kate, annoyed at the wrecking of her plans, demanded I produce Ellen immediately. As I stood about seeking an excuse to do nothing of the sort, Peter put an end to my dilemma by appearing

with my wife's breakfast tray and announcing that for the nonce Ellen was incommunicado. I wondered if she had not retired to put keener edge privately to her snickersnee, or perhaps to see to it her gun was well bulleted, or even to brew a poison cup.

At elevenish, clad in galas, we awaited summons to the wedding and I thought myself quite the toff, but when Peter came for us his garments put me to the blush. He was more handsomely garbed than ever I had been in my life, and appeared far more fitting to be the master of Mandrake than I. Following after Peter we entered the one portion of Mandrake House not altogether familiar to us. On several occasions I had hastily assisted in searching it, but insofar as I knew Kate had never stepped foot inside the place. The one large room on the lower floor was comfortable, even luxurious, but it was entirely without wedding embellishment unless one could so consider the blazing hearth and a pair of handsome brass pots laden with branches of coned pine and scarlet berries.

Aside from Peter and our two selves there was no one present save an odd-appearing person wearing a back-fastened collar designed for a throat much larger than the one it encircled. Peter presented him as the Reverend Mr. Nugent, and the Reverend Mr. Nugent, having silently acknowledged our presence, clasped his hands austere behind his buttocks and, retiring into his collar, refused to have anything further to do with us.

Came a hiatus. Beside the staircase Peter in correct butler stance stood, seemingly unconcerned by immediate events. I beside Kate teetered to and fro seeking also to appear unconcerned.

"Where in the world do you suppose Ellen has got to?" murmured Kate when a full quarter-hour had elapsed.

Knowing no more of the matter than did she, I ventured no reply but continued to rock idiotically on heel and toe, keeping my eyes glassily on the door in case Ellen appeared armed to the teeth.

Another quarter-hour sped before the bride briskly tripped down the stair—and a more unbridelike person there never was, clad as she had been clad every day of her life since first I laid eye on her, in a scant black skirt to her heels, a bodice buttoned, with no nonsense about it, from waist to chin, frightfully starched collar and cuffs, a sizable apron and the Victorian servant's cap which over all protest she wore as pridefully as ever Queen Mary wore her extraordinary hats.

"My word!" gasped Kate. "Do you suppose she intends to be married looking like that?"

Again I ventured no answer, having no answer to venture.

"Come along, Ellen," said Kate very sternly indeed.

The corridor door closed behind the two. After a longish bit of time it opened again. Ellen followed her mistress meekly enough into the room, but methinks there was more determined set to her jaw. The Reverend Mr. Nugent shifted his feet, emerged from his collar and withdrew a well-thumbed prayer-book from a tail pocket. Apparently the ceremony was about to begin. My wife, however, has never been one to be easily balked. She tiptoed towards the man and whispered industriously. He registered thorough disapproval and retired again into his collar, though he kept the prayer-book ready and waiting. With sharp staccato heel-taps Kate fled.

Silence wrapped us round until she appeared bearing what I took to be contents of every flower vase in Mandrake House. Thrusting an armful of blooms at me, she advanced upon Ellen, and Ellen, quailing before such determination, again preceded her mistress into the passageway. When Kate triumphantly led the bride to her groom, apron, cuffs and collar had vanished, the stiff bodice was folded into a becoming line at Ellen's throat, her tightly coiled hair loosed and fluffed into a soft framing for her face. After cradling the glowing yellow chrysanthemums in the bride's arms Kate as self-elected matron of honour smugly took her place beside her—though there was a goodish bit of the gaoler in her appearance as well.

Perhaps it was the flowers she held, or the slender throat rising from the V of her gown, or her soft hair, or all three, that made Ellen seem bridelike and appealing. As she plighted her troth, I began to feel tenderness for the woman welling up inside me. Suppose she *had* murdered her father. It might well be he needed murdering. So very many persons do need it.

Vastly interested, we could make neither fish nor flesh of Mandrake's strange wedding. For days on end it was our chief, indeed I might say our sole, topic of conversation. Never did Kate lapse into thoughtfulness but she emerged, so to speak, with a question in her teeth. "Why in the world," she'd say plaintively, "after practically living in Peter's pocket for decades should Ellen suddenly take the notion to marry him?"

"Why not ask Ellen?" I suggested.

"Ask Ellen!" Kate mimicked. "Don't you suppose I have, dozens of times? I might as well ask the sphinx."

Time and again she berated me soundly for arriving at no solution

of the riddle of the marriage. "Do you suppose it's one of those delayed love affairs—you know, like a typhoon or something that gathers force and after a long time explodes?" she ventured.

"You are a bit confused, my dear," I told her. "Typhoons do not explode."

"You know perfectly well what I mean, Stephen. You are just being exasperating."

"What do you want me to say?"

"Only what you make of this silly marriage."

"I'd like very much to make nothing of it if you'd permit me."

Kate sniffed. "I do believe you are too indolent to think," she said. "I wonder if it is possible that Ellen was suddenly stricken with a grand passion for Peter."

"I doubt if even in her heyday she was capable of such thing, and I'll be bound it did not suddenly come into flower in her post-fecund years."

"Well, do you suppose Peter fell belatedly in love with Ellen?"

"My dear, you are positively indecent. Can you contemplate Peter forgetting his dignity and indulging in the gyrations of sex?"

Kate tittered. "You make marriage sound rather awful. You haven't a complex or anything, have you?"

"I don't believe so. Jest aside, Kate, I *am* upset over this marriage. To me it's quite alarming to consider that Ellen knew of the legacy Madam Mandrake bequeathed her, and then when Madam vanished Ellen turns out to be the last person ever to lay eye on her."

But I refrained from telling Kate that already Ellen had one murder to her credit. Nor did I tell her of my fear that, if Ellen without discovery had tidily disposed of Madam Mandrake and thereby gained a fortune, she might seek to garner a second fortune by tidily disposing of Peter also.

In time the sentimental regard born on Ellen's wedding day vanished. The more consideration I gave the woman, the more I doubted her good intent, and I would not have been too astonished if, any time after his nuptial day, Peter had turned up to serve my breakfast with his head missing. But, altogether unharmed, Peter continued to be high cockalorum of Mandrake's domesticity.

Between my duty to warn Peter of impending doom, and inclination to leave well enough alone, I was not too happy. However, duty won. So one morning as he served me cream for my porridge, I ventured a chat with him.

"I say, Peter, how long have you known Ellen?" I asked.

"Since she entered Madam's service, sir. I believe it's a matter of some twenty-three years."

"Where was Madam living at that time, Peter?"

"In France, sir, at her Paris residence."

"Did she ever say how she came to employ Ellen?"

"I was given the impression Ellen had been in service to one of the great houses in England where Madam was accustomed to visit, sir."

"Did Ellen ever tell you anything of her personal history?"

"Ellen is not what one might call of a loquacious habit, sir," said Peter ambiguously and with faint echo of a period in his voice.

Gladly I ceased attempt to meddle and permitted conscience to return to the secluded corner of soul that was its natural habitat. Truly Peter Petralsky's trust bordered on the divine. Fancy indeed a chap satisfied with a mere "impression" of his wife's past.

On the heels of Peter's rash wedding came a problem which had to do with Eeny, Meeny, Miney and Mo. The four spaniels turned out to be individualists who refused to consider the kennels, restored by Madam Mandrake to their original perfection, a proper place of abode. There was space and luxurious housing for a score of canines of far greater proportion than Eeny, Meeny, Miney and Mo. Nevertheless they would have none of them and strangely enough seemed not to be afflicted with the distaste evinced by both the horses and Danny the dachshund for vicinity of Mandrake House. Contrariwise they loved it and would be happy nowhere else, and if shut in the runs would press their lovely little faces against the wire and en masse weep the day long, and at night weep more abundantly still.

At length our Cookie, buxom Mistress Dottie, waited on Ellen bearing complaint from the staff nightly deprived of sleep by shrill and complaining voices of the pups. Such complaint in due time coming to me, I admonished the quartette with such excellent effect that day and night thereafter they wept louder and more bitterly, until I wearily let them have their will. So on the fifth night after their coming to Mandrake, in single file the funny chaps scampered up the stair and, after a bit of nosing about, happily disposed themselves on the drugget before the mid-corridor hearth. From that moment forthwith they claimed the spot for their very own; and for long weeks so calm were our lives I could find nothing of more serious import to set down than the dreadful hue and cry raised on the occasion I invited my daughter Sarah to take tea with me in the library. With no

shoes on her rosy feet I bore her to the tea party myself, and as we sat chatting cosily before the hearth we were set upon and soundly berated by both Kate and Helen Tempest. Miss Sarah having failed to mention she was to be my guest, the ladies were apprehensive lest she again had taken to her heels and vanished.

Throughout November, though there had been definite indication others besides my family dwelt under Mandrake roof, in the main the month had been peaceful enough. Came December, and again turmoil descended upon us. The spaniels had been well trained, and never since they had been permitted to dwell within the house had they been troublesome. Well enough they liked to romp on the stair and in bedchamber and rooms, but they let it be known they considered the mid-corridor their own particular bailiwick. They would sleep the night through on the drugget before the hearth until Jacob came to fetch them for their morning run. On December eighth, somewhere near to the hour of three o'clock, a mighty yapping set up outside my door. Sleep-ridden, I put the racket down to puppyish quarrels and did nothing more than growl peevishly into my pillow. However, when it took on volume I roused sufficiently to hear Helen Tempest speak to the yammering pups, and then almost immediately knuckle the door between our bedchamber and the passageway. Though Helen is an exceedingly calm person, no sooner had I opened to her than I knew something to be vastly awry.

"What's up?" I asked.

"The dogs are very uneasy," she answered. "I'm afraid they'll awaken the baby. They pay no attention at all to me. Would you mind seeing what you can do?"

"Very well," I growled. "I'm afraid giving them the run of the house was a great mistake."

I donned decent garb and went with her. I touched the wall button and saw the trio of golden spaniels cower whiningly beneath a settle, while Mo, his small body galvanized by excitement, stood in angry stance between our door and the Caroline suite, barking with might and main.

"Mo," I called sharply, "stop the racket, you annoying little beast."

Mo turned his head apologetically towards me but got on with his defiant scolding. Annoyed, I stepped towards the dog, but even as I reached a hand to him he rose in the air, described an arc and fell

into the stair well. May I never again hear such sickening sound as that of the small body striking the floor below, and the almost human cry which followed!

In abject terror the remaining spaniels tore across the corridor, through the door of our chamber and, clambering into the bed, burrowed frenziedly beneath the covers. And very much did I wish to do likewise.

Instead, I fled down the stair to find the pitiful creature broken and dying at the newel post. As I lifted him, the valiant little chap managed a feeble wag of his tail, but I had no more than laid hand upon him when I knew his hours of life were few. 'In the library I stirred a blaze, that at least he might have the comfort of warmth. Then, sitting beside the hearth, I held the dying pup on a cushion laid across my knees, and I have no shame at all in confessing I wept. As slowly the paralysis of a broken spine crept over his body I was glad, for I knew it precluded suffering. As bright eyes glazed, a tiny tongue sought to lick my hand. Then Mo of Mandrake gave up his gallant ghost and was still. As dawn broke I laid him on the library chesterfield, and though my act may seem maudlin, I crossed the sooty little paws on his breast in the fashion of a Christian, covered him with my robe and left him while I went to tell Kate what had happened. So angered was I, had I come upon spirit or spectre I swear I would have striven mightily to send it howling back to hell.

When Jacob came to fetch the dogs for their usual morning run I bade him take and keep them at his cottage and together we concocted a tale to tell young Stephen. Again Stephen accepted my word as gospel when I told him Mo had gone to visit his mum at the kennels. For long enough the lad complained resentfully that Eeny, Meeny and Miney no longer slept curled at the hearth, or romped with him throughout the house, but in time came to look forwards to the trio of little dogs waiting like three golden images at the lane's turn to cast themselves on him in a frenzy of love and slobbering tongues. But it was long enough before ever again they set willing foot in Mandrake House.

The second troubling thing came on the day Mo died. When at last Stephen had been made happy I could no longer endure confinement or even the company of human beings, and thrusting on jacket and cap, set out trudging northwards to a tiny village cuddled down on the riverbank beyond Scarletville. I turned wearily in at the village

pub for a bit of bread and meat, and vastly more swilling of lager than was for my good and benefit.

The jaunt homewards seemed a goodish bit longer than the one forwards, and I was altogether spent and chilled when at last I came to Mandrake House. I stopped at the hearth belowstairs for a warming, and there young Stephen and Rosemary caught me up. As we chatted Kate descended to ring for tea. I bade her hold off a bit while with Stephen I went abovestairs to render ourselves tidy. We had just reached the stairhead when the lad's tongue suddenly stilled. But when Rosemary had removed his cap and jacket and was bearing them into his bedchamber, with a joyous shout he dashed into the middle of the corridor. As I had so often beheld him do to Peter, he flung his arms into the gesture of an embrace and turned his small face upwards in radiant pleasure. Again I felt my hackles rise, and when Stephen began telling into space the tale of Mo's supposed visit to his mum, I was so well frightened I could neither speak or move. Perhaps it was my abject terror that caused the kindly wraith to take on appearance of substance.

Always I have heard that the walking dead materialize piecemeal. Perhaps a hand appears . . . an arm . . . then a shoulder. But this was not the fashion of the phantom of Mandrake House.

The lad's antics had so upset me I felt sorry limbs buckle beneath me. Leaning for support against the wall I cupped palms over my eyes and prayed when I opened them again the capers would have ceased. When I did open them the man whose knees Stephen clasped was wholly visible, and in an odd manner I was comforted, for there was nothing evil in the eyes that gazed sadly into mine. Definitely it was borne on me that this wraith at least meant no ill towards those who dwelt in Mandrake House. For a little moment I beheld distinctly the thin hand resting on Stephen's head, the mottled colouring of the country jacket, thin swarthy face and dark eyes, crisp hair white at temples, and then the misty man tousled Stephen's head, bent to loosen the arms clasped about his knees and, with a kindly reassuring nod, sauntered across the corridor, the brace of tawny dogs pacing sedately beside him, and vanished into thin air.

On fluid legs I stumbled towards a hearth-side settle, eased myself into a corner, while Stephen, in the fashion of an energetic young crane, doubled a leg under him and on the other began leaping the corridor's length. Behind me a door opened and closed. A voice

called, "Hi, fella," and Stephen without a pause in agilities answered, "Hi, yerself." I began to understand more clearly the rapid Americanization of my son.

Lifting my head above the settle back I opened lips to speak. Before I could manage a word Rosemary, grasping her small bosom, squeaked, "Heavens! you frightened me," then added somewhat waveringly, "Maybe I'd better come around on the other side where you won't look so much like the head of the headless horseman."

"Do," I answered. "I was about to ask for a bit of chat."

On the opposite settle Rosemary sat with hands folded primly in her lap, crossed ankles swinging quite inches from the floor, as I vaguely wondered why in the world she always made me think of a *very* good little girl who had either just committed a great mischief, or was about to commit one, and was taking one's measure to weigh possible reaction to her wrongdoing.

As I sought subtle words to clothe inquiries, Rosemary impishly mimicked my own voice. "You wished a bit of chat?" she asked.

Roused I stammered, "I do, Rosemary. I do indeed, if you don't mind."

Jerking a facile thumb towards the bounding Stephen, she asked, "With or without?" And when I'd caught her drift I said rather sheepishly, "Without."

"Hey, you!" she called, and when Stephen teetering on one leg paused, she again jerked facile thumb and said, "Scram, chum," and Stephen answered, "Sez you," very sarcastically but nevertheless "scrammed," still leaping on one industrious leg.

"How in the world do you accomplish it, Rosemary?" I asked.

"Accomplish what?"

"Cause my son to be cheerfully obedient. Hitherto no one has been successful in making the slightest impression on him."

Rosemary grinned. "Psychology," she said briefly.

"Psychology?" I questioned. "Isn't he a bit immature for such things?"

"Not in the U.S.A. Here it begins with bottles and diapers. It's the abracadabra of our existence. It cures sinus, gall-bladder trouble and delirium tremens, it begat Alcoholics Anonymous, and finds out all the reasons why ladies want to sneak poisons into their husbands' soup."

And not knowing quite how to answer I merely said, "Really?" but

Rosemary, sensing my bewilderment, took pity on me. "I'm only kidding," she said kindly.

"Kidding?" I asked, still more confused.

Rosemary sighed. "Spoofing," she explained. "Ribbing. Having you on."

"Sorry. I'm afraid I'm a bit on the stupid side."

"Oh, well," she consoled me, "you've been ill, haven't you?" And she hinted a second time, "You said something about a chat, Mr. Mandrake?"

I began carefully. "Rosemary, have you ever seen anything untoward in Mandrake House?"

"Untoward?"

"Perhaps I should have said unusual."

"Oh yes, indeed," said Rosemary brightly, "Jake Schultz doing a rumba on his peg leg."

"You are a minx," I told her severely. "You know very well I mean nothing of the sort."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, let me put it this way. Have you noticed anything extraordinary in young Stephen's behaviour?"

For a long moment Rosemary did not speak. Then leaning forwards she folded arms over knee and said earnestly, "Mr. Mandrake, maybe this would be a good time for you to begin realizing one of our national characteristics is a liking for straight questions and straight answers. The reason Americans make bum diplomats is because they hate being forced to go galloping around Robin Hood's barn. I know I do. So let's get down to cases."

"Cases?"

"Oh, Lord!" said Rosemary. "I do wish you understood Americanese. Look, Mr. Mandrake: if you are trying to find out if I'm hep to Steve's frequent conversations with the little man who isn't there, I am. And," she added, "it doesn't mean a thing. All kids do that kind of thing. American kids, anyway."

"It may be so, Rosemary—but remember Stephen is not an American."

"Isn't he?" She cocked a knowing eye. "If Steve hasn't a good big puddle of old Cy Van Etten's blood in him, I'll eat my hat. That is," she amended, "I'd eat my hat if I had a hat—which I haven't."

Out of Rosemary's welter of words I picked a disconcerting fact

that apparently she was more cognizant than I of my forebears.

"Cy Van Etten?" I questioned.

"Cyrus Krispien Van Etten, Stephen's great-great-grandpa. Deacon of the Dutch Reformed Church, twice elected to the state legislature, later member of Congress of these-here United States, stricken down in the prime of his sixty-second year. Husband of Sarah Mandrake. Father of Betsy and Fanny Van Etten, afterward the Honourable Mrs. Frederick Ellers and the Duchess of Hone."

"I say, you do know something of my family!"

"Why not?" she asked. "You wouldn't set out on uncharted seas without a compass, would you? When you picked me to governess Steve, I decided it would be a good bet to find out what sort of material I had to deal with." She paused, and then with the banter gone from her voice, said: "It's good material, Mr. Mandrake. Grade A-1 plus, and if I were you I'd forget Stephen's funny business. I pulled the same stunts myself when I was a kid and I grew into a pretty normal female."

She stretched, arose and said, "I'd better get going and see what the young master has up his sleeve." Then, pausing, she laid a friendly small paw on my knee. "Don't worry about Steve," she said. "He's strictly O.K."

While I had become aware Rosemary had entirely misconstrued my meaning and thought my concern was for Stephen's mental health, I was comforted, for her attitude towards my questions showed plainly enough Rosemary had chanced upon no nebulous strollers in Mandrake House.

Looking into her honest young eyes, I covered her tiny hands with my own. "Shall you mind if I say you are a wonderful small person, Rosemary?"

Comically fluttering her lids in exaggerated cinema fashion, she smirked, "Oh, Mr. Mandrake, I bet you say that to all the girls." And leaving me dazed, she betook herself off in the manner which always caused expectation she was about to fold arms snugly into wings and fly off into mid-air.

Belowstairs I sat rather smugly regarding Kate busy over the cups. "You look," she said, "exactly like the feline who lunched on a warm-blooded, feathered, egg-laying vertebrate animal, if you get my meaning. What in the world are you looking so smug about?"

"I think I've just been flirted with."

"Wouldn't you know positively?"

"Should I?"

"Are you implying you've *never* flirted?"

"At the age of three I fell in love with a very lovely woman," I began.

"Oh, dear," said Kate, "what a silly conversation! Will you have rum or milk in your tea?"

From the day of my encounter with the phantom in the corridor I well knew it was the poor ghost of the last Stephen which Mandrake harboured, for face and hair, the coat that covered him, the whip in his hand, the curiously carved pipe between his teeth, even the pair of tawny setters roaming beside him, were all painted on the canvas hanging above the mantelpiece in Mandrake's dining room. But I wondered if Mandrake harboured, also, other and more dreadful spectres, responsible perhaps for the death of young Stephen's dachshund and of gallant little Mo. There was nothing on earth of which I possessed so scant a knowledge as the movements of spirits other than spirits corked into bottles, and made resolve I would seek such knowledge forthwith. To such end I began an intensive and most unrewarding browsing in the public libraries of Van Etten and adjacent towns.

Very much did I wish to discuss the phenomenon of the corridor with Kate, and a half-score times hemmed and hawed at a beginning but never could I find hardihood to get on with it. And then, astonishingly, Kate herself broached the subject by asking if I truly believed in ghosts. Not at all sure how to answer a point-blank question like that, I decided to take pattern by Helen Tempest and inquired, "Exactly what do you mean by ghost, my dear?"

"Would you think me very silly if I said I saw a ghost—several ghosts, in fact?"

"I don't know. It would depend on what you thought you saw, when and where you thought you saw it. There are some fairly shadowy corners in Mandrake House." Seeking to put a light touch to the alarming chat, I added, "And of course it would depend on the state of your digestion."

But Kate would have none of my levity. She brooded a moment, then said, "At first I did try to convince myself my eyes played me tricks, but it's no good, Stephen. I *did* see something—not once but twice."

"Suppose you tell me about it."

"You remember I was ill just before Sarah's birth?"

I nodded, and, carefully choosing the most revealing words at her command, Kate began a second time. "It was full daylight. No electrics were turned on or were necessary. I was about to descend when I became conscious of a man, followed by two dogs, coming up the stair towards me."

"What sort of man?" I asked, though I knew well enough.

As if seeking to recall every detail, she spoke deliberately: "A tall man, rather thin, and I'd say about forty. *Young* forty. Some men you know are old at forty, some are not. This chap was the young sort. I didn't see the lower portion of his face—he was below me—but I remember his hair was dark with a sprinkle of white at the brow. I had an impression his eyes were dark too."

"How was he dressed?"

"A roughish tweed jacket, brown with a bit of green in it."

"What else?"

"Riding breeks, a saffron waistcoat buttoned with brass buttons. I think a hunting stock. His hands were thrust into his breeches pockets, and he carried a whip under his arm."

"The dogs?"

"Gordons—handsome tawny things they were. I had an impulse to reach a hand out to them."

"Did you?"

"My dear fool," said Kate indignantly, "if a brace of phantom dogs came racing towards you, what would you do?"

"Definitely, I'd flee. That is," I amended, "if I was able to flee."

Kate peered at me curiously. Then she asked, "Did you ever see the dogs, Stephen?"

I nodded.

"When?"

"Let's have your tale first. Mine can very well keep."

"There really isn't much more to this particular tale. I stood stock-still until the man was within arm's length. After that I'm afraid I do not know what I did."

Inwardly I berated myself for a zany. Despite my own encounter with man and dogs in the hall-corridor, it had not occurred to me Kate might also encounter them.

"Was that the lone time you saw them?"

"Yes, it was, but I saw something else."

"What and where?"

"A woman doing her hair at the dressing table in the Caroline suite."

I fell to pondering how many ghosts all told Mandrake harboured, and Kate asked indignantly, "Don't you want to hear about the woman?"

"Not at all," I answered, "but I expect I'd better."

"It was Caroline herself," announced Kate triumphantly. "I thought she was rather a nasty person because she held the hairpins between her lips."

Regardless of my distress I could not help guffawing, Kate's disdain for the undainty ghost was so very real. It was vastly enlightening to discuss the fantastic affair with one who could look upon it in the light of her own experience. And in time we came to agreement that Mandrake's disturbance centered in the Caroline Phillips suite; each instance we had beheld an apparition it was either in the suite, going towards it or emerging from it. I was one ghost ahead of Kate, for while she had beheld Caroline, Stephen and his dogs, she had not beheld the shadowy woman who had been my first contact with phantomdom—and I kept to myself the fact that the shawl wrapped about the spectre and the shawl in which Miss Sarah snuggled the night of her mysterious disappearance were one and the same.

I in turn told Kate at length of young Stephen's cosy chats with the little man who wasn't there, and my doubts concerning the wholesomeness of his love affair with a shade—friendly though it be—and Kate's suggestion that perhaps Stephen's impalpable pal paid him visits in the faraway corner chamber sent me into high dither and immediate action. Thereafter to his delight the lad slept on the couch in our own bedchamber and only small Rosemary remained to keep the company of perambulating spirits on the north side of the corridor. For a bit she was puzzled and somewhat piqued at Stephen's removal, but very shortly at Kate's behest Rosemary took possession of the second bed in Helen Tempest's bedchamber, and Miss Sarah's beribboned basket came to rest in a snug corner of our own, while the "Sarah" chamber was turned into a day nursery for both children. Not that a gentleman so masculine as my son had use of a nursery. The

day long, wet or dry, hot or cold, he ranged far and wide without the house, and often enough I felt heartily sorry for small Rosemary who, endowed with a stalwart conscience, felt it her bounden duty to follow in his wake.

Lest our suddenly new sleeping arrangements hint at untoward circumstances, I bade Peter explain to the household it was for the purpose of conserving fuel that the bedchambers on the north side of the corridor had been put into disuse, and as it would require more doughty characters than the somewhat ancient members of our staff to gainsay Peter, we settled into cosy if somewhat restricted mode of existence.



CHAPTER NINE

IN RETROSPECT it seems fantastic that in the year 1943 our living arrangements were based on the fact a very old-fashioned ghost or ghosts concerned itself, or themselves, with the haunting of Mandrake House. Yet the haunting was a stable, established fact. I had the evidence of my own experience and of Kate's, and though neither Peter nor Ellen ever admitted such things, I knew well enough they also had beheld Mandrake's restless shades. And never did I step foot into the mid-corridor or ascend the stair without shivering expectation of beholding something I had no wish to behold, or come and go throughout the house without casting stealthy glances over my shoulder.

In the hours when needs must we be housebound, Kate and I began industrious search through house-book and journal and letters for the possible reason for Stephen's return to earth, or for Caroline's, and at first found not a single fact on which we might base even a hearty theory. Nevertheless we continued our delving, and chatted with townsmen and villagers seeking possible explanation of the cause of Mandrake's wandering spectres. If those with whom we spoke knew aught of unhappy circumstance connected with Mandrake House they knew also how to keep it to themselves.

Our first clue came in a manner vastly comic. Since coming to Mandrake we had grown to know a number of pleasant people—Dr. Vanningham and his smart divorcée sister, Prudence Wright; Jonathan Weeks, proprietor of Van Etten's lone newsprint, and his young wife; Mr. and Mrs. Travis, duo of shy musicians; Father Gillis, the pastor of the Roman Catholic church; LaFollette Wilroy, Vicar of the

Anglicans, and his widowed daughter Mary Creed. Benjamin and Jennifer Froste came often enough to Mandrake to be part of the group which to an extent titivated our living.

It was just before Advent we had our first tea party. Jennifer and Benjamin had come for the week end. Prudence Wright, Vanningham, Mary Creed, the Traveses and the Jonathan Weekses were to take tea with us on Sunday, and if their churchly duties did not hinder, the men of God also. Sunday was a fine brisk day, and after luncheon with our house guests we fared forth on a jaunt through Mandrake Wood to the edge of Scarletville, and returned before tea-time, fairly well spent. Kate and the Frostes went immediately above-stairs to set themselves right. But my halting limb made the stair tiresome, and I did my tidying in the master-floor snugger, and then went to await the coming of our guests in the drawing room. With an expression which in one less dignified than he might be called a smirk, Peter came to announce a caller, a Mr. Gamaliel Scott. In the British service I had known several Scotts and though I could remember none with Christian name of Gamaliel I thought it very possible one of them, coming to the States, had looked me up. Vastly pleased I followed Peter into the hall-corridor where I became immediately aware of the reason for his smirk.

With small head swaying in rhythm to the swinging pendulum, a fancy lad stood before the corridor clock, so enraptured he was wholly unaware of our coming until I laid a hand on his shoulder. When he turned, it was not towards me but to follow with adoring eyes Peter until he vanished through the pantry door. For a moment thereafter we stood in somewhat embarrassed silence, and then the comic child inquired in a voice hushed by awe, "Is he the Lord?"

Very much I was taken aback. Ghosts it might have, and spirits and spectres, but insofar as I knew Mandrake laid no claim to harbouring the Divinity. As I did not at all know how to answer I said nothing beyond bidding the child to follow me. With a foot in the corridor and another in the drawing room, the boy halted, seemingly bedazed and uncertain if he should enter or turn and flee. Again I bade him follow and timidly he did, finally coming to perch on the extreme edge of the chair opposite to me, his incredulous eyes staring as if they could not credit what they beheld.

I judged my visitor's age to be seven or possibly eight years, and never had I beheld anyone so utterly conscious of himself. Well he

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might be, for the dashing ensemble which clothed him was truly something to excite self-consciousness. Jacket and breeks, a startling shade of brown, were striped, dotted and crossbarred by every possible variant of colour, and the deerstalker's hat precariously held in place by his overlarge ears was of the same dreadful fabric, with added fillip of a knot of gaudy feathers thrust into the band. His sleeves drooped to his knuckles, breeks to the heels of glaring yellow boots, the collar of his oversized shirt was confined by quite the most crimson cravat that ever left a dyer's vat, and a kerchief of like hue was folded into the jacket pocket. Altogether my visitor greatly resembled a broken prism multitudinously reflecting light.

Either the boy was a seer with ability to read minds or my amazement very patent, for, casting an admiring glance over his ensemble, he remarked his clothing was new and had been donned for the first time to visit Mandrake. Having permitted this honour to sink into my soul he got on with his chat and it developed his "Grandpaw" credited "Jake" with giving his "Maw" money to purchase the dreadful clothing, but Gamaliel, desiring firsthand information, "assed" Jake if this be truth and Jake had sourly denied doing any such thing. And furthermore Jake declared he never was going to do any such thing, the family Scott being to his mind shiftless and undeserving of his bounty. Having repeated Jacob's tirade verbatim the child added somewhat forlornly, "I sure like Jake, don'chew?"

When I had reassured him as to my affection for Jacob, he went back to his monologue: "Sam sez this house's full of spooks and they'd chase the hell outta me if I dared come here," and he added, "I did dare, didn't I?" And then as a startling thought came to him his mouth flew agape and he inquired, "You ain't no spook, are ya?"

Dazedly I affirmed my corporeal condition of body, and the child, listening to my words, at the end coaxed, "Say somethin' else, willya?"

Obligingly I complied. "What is your name?" I asked.

"Gam Scott," he said glibly. "What's yourn?"

And when I told him it was Ellers-Mandrake, he seemed vastly let down.

"Sam said the lord's name was Mandrake, but you don't look like no lord to me. It's the big guy who looks like a lord."

And then it was borne upon me the lord, supposedly an inmate of Mandrake, was not of divine but mortal origin, and somewhat reluctantly I explained that both Peter and I were entirely without title.

Undoubtedly Gamaliel felt he had been cheated, but making the best of his disappointment he got on with his quest for information.

"Didja ever see a lord?" he asked, and I answered that I had, several in fact.

"Did they have whiskers?" he next demanded.

I hastily cast about in my mind to recall one of the nobility complete with hirsute adornment, but failing to do so offered palliative. "I have seen portraits of lords having beards," I told him.

"You seen what?"

"A portrait—" I pointed to one of the Mandrake ladies—"like that," I explained.

"Oh, you mean pictures. You sure talk like hell."

I assured him I did mean "pictures" and apologized for my unseemly method of speech. The conversation came to a dead end and I sat ill at ease while Gamaliel scanned me from head to toe, but shortly he began a new series of questions.

"These-here lords now," he said, "how do they do number one and number two?"

This was a poser. Should I lose face by confessing I had no notion what was meant by numbers one and two in connection with the British nobility, or should I have a try at concealment of my abysmal ignorance? But without awaiting my reply Gamaliel got on.

"Sam sez lords ain't got no behinds or . . ." He stammered a bit, shamefaced, and then burst out, "Nor no nothing to do number one with."

Light dawned and greatly I wanted to guffaw, for a nebulous procession of titled gentlemen appeared in my mind's eye, all totally devoid of "behinds" or appurtenance necessary for the performance of "number one." Holding a straight face, I assured him that insofar as I knew lords were fashioned and performed much as other males of the human race. But beholding his disappointment, I hastily added that in externals they were altogether different, and stressed their possession of ermine robes, sceptres, crowns, etc. The gold watches and diamond rings were entirely of Gamaliel's bestowing.

By the time whimsies and whatnots of the British nobility had been thoroughly looked into I had won the lad's trust to such extent he removed and bestowed his impossible hat beneath the chair, edged his body from its forward perch into a cosier position, undid his jacket and thrust thumbs under braces of such villainous hue I silently

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vowed, if Jacob were responsible for the dreadful ensemble, personally to shoot him at dawn or any other hour of the day I chanced upon him. But Gamaliel, all unknowing of my fell design, evinced a still greater degree of friendliness. Reaching into a rear breek's pocket, he produced a packet of foully odoured tobacco and casually offered it to me. I had too long dwelt in the vicinity of Jacob to risk a tobacco chewer in the drawing room and definitely declined. Seemingly relieved, the child returned packet to pocket, and I decided such gesture was more for the purpose of keeping pace with his sportsmanlike attire than because of actual love of tobacco.

When the overture towards friendliness had been got over, my guest went off at a new angle. "You ain't a-goin' to keep on a-livin' here?" he inquired, and when assured such was my intent his astonishment quite dammed his flow of chat and he regarded me with obvious though dubious admiration. "Ain'tcha feared of the spooks?" he inquired.

"What spooks?" I asked.

He waved an all-embracing arm. "All of 'em," he said. "Miz Mandrakes an' her fella an' Mr. Mandrakes an' the gurl he killed."

"What?" I gasped. "Whatever are you talking about?"

"Well, this-here fella what usta live here a long time off," he explained patiently. "Grandpaw usta work here and he knows all about it. Mr. Mandrakes had a gurl and Mr. Mandrakes he killed her 'cause she was a-goin' to have a kid. There's some sez 'twar Miz Mandrakes what killed her, but Grandpaw sez *she* didn't care a thing 'bout Mr. Mandrakes' sleeping with this-here gurl because she was a-sleepin' with her own fella. Grandpaw sez 'twar Miz Mandrakes killed Mr. Mandrakes, though, so's she could marry this fella. She did, too, soon's he was dead. All of 'em's dead now and they come back here nights and raise hell. Lotsa folks heard 'em, seen 'em too. Jake knows all about 'em. You ass him."

If Gamaliel was seeking to startle me he must truly have been satisfied for I sat staring at him wordlessly. But he had not yet done.

"There's some sez 'twar Jake's paw what killed Mr. Mandrakes and killed his gurl too. He was crazier'n hell; usta go round praying for folks in their back yards. They hadda cart him off to the 'sylum, Grandpaw sez."

If there was an iota of truth in the wizened child's tale, here indeed was reason for Stephen Mandrake's restless wandering of the earth.

Yet unless, in the fashion of mortal men, he had masked his viciousness from sight, it was no wanton killer I beheld in the mid-corridor. For the better portion of an hour in word and phrase of ancient Saxon usage Gamaliel with gusto narrated a dingy résumé of deception, lust and betrayal concerned with the last generation of Mandrake men and women, told and retold by "Grandpaw," onetime coachman to Mandrake House; of Stephen's discovery of the horns already grown on his brow, of how he had betaken himself off, leaving the sinners to their sin.

Even now, when the bits of Mandrake's puzzle have fallen into place, I do not know the reason for Stephen's return from his wandering, but return he did and for long enough seemingly dwelt in peace under the same roof with his wife and her lover. But Stephen also supposedly fell far from grace, betraying and in time murdering a young girl, servant in his household, and thereafter met death himself, perhaps by the hand of the girl's father, perhaps by Caroline's or even by his own.

The splendid character and high ideals with which I had endowed Stephen were torn asunder by a babbling child on a winter afternoon, and having done this to me, he fastened his terrible jacket, balanced his impossible hat on his impossible ears and betook himself off, leaving me knee-deep in wrecked theories. I fear I was but a sorry host at our first tea party in Mandrake House.

Adroitly I questioned Jacob Schultz, and though I had no direct answer out of him, his evasive manner confirmed the tale told by Gamaliel Scott, for Jacob in anger vowed if ever he caught one of the Scott breed on Mandrake land he would strangle him with his bare hands. As I had not mentioned the name "Scott" to him, Jacob betrayed his knowledge of the source of my information, and undoubtedly Jacob voiced his threat elsewhere, for though I industriously sought "Grandpaw" Scott uphill and downdale, I never once came upon him and I had to give over my search. But the tale of Gamaliel continued to simmer in me, a veritable witches' brew.



CHAPTER TEN

WE WERE determined our first holiday season at Mandrake should be outstanding, and outstanding it was, though not in the manner planned or desired. This was the Christmas of '43. Already the handwriting on the wall had become plainly visible to the bankrupt firm of Schicklegruber, Mussolini and Hirohito, and so vastly more holiday spirit was abroad. Mandrake horses sported knots of Christmas garniture in their headbands, and Jacob had set about educating young Stephen in the art of exploding corn kernels, dipping them into poisonous-appearing colouring and threading them onto long strings for the bedecking of his Christmas tree. And he had cut huge bundles of greenings and piled them on the south side of Mandrake House against the time they would be needed for its befurbishing.

Handsome odours drifted from our kitchen. I, who for long had known but scant Christmasing, would well have liked to forget a master's dignity and go with young Stephen to dip exploring fingers into succulent this's and that's, for never did I pass the pantry door but I beheld him stealing kitchenwards or emerging from it meditatively licking his chops. Perhaps Kate and I were oversentimental in our preparations for Christmas, and wishful that everyone whose lives touched our own should have a pleasant holiday season. We planned to have Helen Tempest return to her own home on the afternoon preceding Christmas, and Rosemary do likewise on Christmas morn. In their absence, with Ellen's assistance we would ourselves care for the children. Jennifer and Benjamin Froste were to spend Christmas at Mandrake and on Christmas Eve we would give our first formal dinner. Peter had suggested that inasmuch as Madam Man-

drake had provided a gala for the household staff, it would be pleasant if we followed such custom, and I assured him I would gladly sanction whatever project was put forwards. But it seemed to me to arrange a gala would be somewhat difficult, for neither Peter nor Ellen had condescended to mix with townsmen or villagers, and our handmaidens were too newly come to Mandrake to have accumulated a galaxy of friends. The proposed festivities therefore became almost entirely the concern of Jacob Schultz, and Jacob, being on friendly terms with practically every man, woman and child in Dutchess County, went forth in a state of ecstatic garrulousness and bade ladies and gentlemen to the number of twenty to participate.

For days preceding Christmas our handmaidens merrily scrimped their labours to assist in the cleaning and garnishing of the carriage loft, while Jacob set himself to lampblackening the huge pot-bellied stove, boasting that when he had been a lad of fourteen, a groom in Mandrake's stables, he had accomplished the same task for the same purpose.

On December twentieth we awakened to a snowstorm of a magnitude never experienced before in our lives, and found in the hours of night so steadily had it snowed the world had lost all semblance to reality and become a truly magical realm. The frozen river had vanished into a vast white valley and hills beyond appeared a monstrous row of great and small frosted puddings. When breakfast was done, Kate, young Stephen and I, wrapped into mummylike contour, sped into the wonderful out-of-doors and, with occasional forays inside for food and warmth, out of doors we remained the day long. Snow continued to fall steadily until well after dusk when it ceased altogether. With curtains drawn back to view the white world outside the windows, we ate our dinner by candlelight and thereafter, well wearied with the day's sporting, ascended and went cheerfully to bed.

At daybreak I awakened to find snow was again falling. The weather turned extremely cold, and the cold continued for a full day and night. All this put different complexion on the Christmas gala, for it would be quite impossible to transport numbers of guests by wheeled vehicle as planned, and the lone sleigh Mandrake possessed was a small affair seating but two persons—three at uttermost. As further deterrent it was discovered the stove could not be kept alight, and without continuous heat the carriage loft was too chill for use. But Jacob, not to be daunted by wind or weather, set the stable crew

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to clearing paths hither and yon and doubtless by chicanery and guile coaxed Van Etten's roadmasters into opening the road north to Scarletville and clearing Mandrake Lane. Thereupon Jacob, with jingling bells, set forth in his tidy sleigh and before his return arranged not only for the transportation of guests but for "fiddlers" also.

What I have set down regarding the servant's gala may appear trivial, but in the light of events to come it is far from it. Indeed the gala was altogether a part of the terror which gripped Mandrake House on that horrendous Christmas Eve.

As much as dignity permitted, Peter had lent countenance to Jacob's frenzied preparations. Not so Ellen, who kept disdainfully aloof. But when festivities seemed about to be abandoned it was Ellen who waited on me with suggestion the gala might be held where it had been held during Madam's time at Mandrake House—the common room of the attic floor. I was amused at such brazen right-about-face and decided to spoof Ellen a bit.

"I rather thought you didn't fancy the idea of a Christmas gala," I said. In seeming dismay Ellen answered, "Why ever so, sir? I thought you were most kind to permit it."

"Not at all, but now that it has been decided to forego the affair I'm really more pleased than otherwise."

For a moment Ellen fidgeted. "The staff will be most unhappy, sir, I'm afraid. They have been quite satisfactory on the whole, and it would be a great pity if they become disgruntled."

"Do you think they might, Ellen?"

"Indeed I do, sir. They've been looking forwards to their bit of fun."

"Perhaps later when the stove has been mended, or the weather lets up a bit, we could manage something for them."

"Perhaps so, sir, but it wouldn't be quite the same as a Christmas gala, if I may say so, sir."

"Very likely not, Ellen, but possibly there might have been a good bit of boisterous skylarking and I shouldn't fancy having the moppets awakened, or our dinner guests annoyed. No, Ellen, I think we'd best give over idea of the gala."

"Very good, sir," said Ellen, and betook herself off, but I knew that by no manner of means had I heard the last of it.

The same evening Peter presented himself and with usual preliminary two-fingered cough, said to Kate, "Pardon me, Madam. If it

would not cause inconvenience, Ellen would like a word with you."

A-ho, I thought, Ellen has hit on a different and stronger argument. She had. As requested we traipsed abovestairs to where Ellen awaited our coming in the hall-corridor.

"What is it, Ellen?" I asked.

Ellen fingered her apron. "I took the liberty of asking Jacob to do a tune on his fiddle, sir, and I'm having the staff romp about with the grooms. There are four couples, sir. I suggested they be as boisterous as possible, and," concluded Ellen in a high triumph, "it's scarcely discernible, sir."

I chortled. I had no intent to withhold permission for the gala to be held abovestairs, but I permitted Ellen her victory and she tripped off, smug and satisfied. From overhead sounds of shrill sweet tones of Jacob's fiddle and the muted tread of dancers were more pleasant than otherwise. So Jacob and his minions transferred their labours from carriage house to attic, and with much pranking again pressed the too-willing handmaidens into service.

Garnished handsomely from rooftop to cellarage, on December twenty-third Mandrake was ready and waiting for Christmas, and on such date, after we had dined, Kate and I went to the common room to view the handiwork of Jacob and his cohorts and found it truly handsome.

With the exception of storage space walled at either end, the room stretches the breadth of the house and is lighted by five of the seven dormers crowning the roof. With curtaining drawn aside from one, I stood with Kate looking down upon the blue shadow of mountains silhouetted against the snowy river and shared in her thought that, within and without, Mandrake was very like to an old-fashioned Christmas card.

As we happily peered there came clearly to our ears a silvery chime and sound of a clock striking the hour.

"What a lovely chime!" said Kate. "Where is it?"

I glanced about and save a silent electrical affair crowned in greenings and clamped above the manteltree there was no clock in the room, nor could I remember a chiming clock at Mandrake, other than the thunderous old fellow in the master corridor.

"I really don't know where it is," I told Kate. "Perhaps it's in the north addition. It rather sounds like a woman's clock; it might very well be Ellen's."

Dismissing the clock from our thoughts, we continued with our inspection and admiration of Jacob's ingenious decorations.

Tall fir trees ornamented the room's four corners and from these to the chandelier in mid-ceiling were strung immense garlands of greenery. Manteltree and wall lights were banked in cedars and coy clusters of mistletoe, and mistletoe hung from the chandelier and peeped from the pine boughs screening the musicians' gaudily coloured chairs. Between chimneypiece and dormer a long table was already gaily clothed for a midnight feast. The center of it was ornamented by a half-score of candles, stretching from one end to the other, the labour of Jacob's prideful hands—candles moulded of bayberry, a good two feet in height and of girth not easily circled by thumb and forefinger. Another half-score were set within the greenery of the mantelshef, quaint candles indeed, and not only the delight of Jacob but of Kate as well, for every sconce in Mandrake was filled with them. I do not know if Kate shared Jacob's obsession that his candles were buckler and shield against the devil and all his works, but I know she loved their pungent odour and soft glow, and forever made excuse to set them alight.

The eve of Christmas brought fortunate weather, the storm long spent, the air brisk and cold. From a chill cobalt sky wan sun glistened on the snow with prismatic light, making a handsome background indeed for Mandrake's yellow bricks, but while the beauty without the house was wholly God-wrought, the beauty within was entirely man's labours. Apple-log fire blazed on every hearth. Stephen's garlands of coloured corn bedecked and bedizened the ceiling-high fir tree made pungent by the fire's warmth. And God only knows where Jacob had procured the electrical baubles for its decoration; doubtless by highway robbery, for they were not to be had of the shops. But procure them he did, most mysteriously, and in our trial lighting of it the tree showed mightily as a promise of the angels. Mistletoe hung from door lintels, wreaths at the windows, haw and pine branches abounded in every room, as well as glistening green myrtle and great vases of bittersweet dyed to Christmas scarlet. At luncheon that day with Kate, I lifted a glass in Christmas toast to Stephen's portrait banked in cedar boughs. Whatever his sins, he had loved the ancient house of his sires, loved it as we would so willingly love it would it but permit us to, and it seemed to me the smiling eyes of Stephen gave promise that in time this would be so.

Even in the bedchambers on the north side of the corridor hearths were alight, and doors throughout the house were thrown wide that the spirit of Christmas might enter and bless, for such is our Kentish custom, and perhaps it was this blessing which held us from very madness in the hours which were to come.

Directly luncheon was done I drove to meet Jennifer and Benjamin at the Etten depot. After a libation poured to Christmas we packed snow on the hillside between the orchard and lane and tobogganed, madly and inexpertly, again and again down the long slope, coming at nightfall wearily and cheerily to the pleasant, lighted house. Young Stephen had torn his rigid schedule of life asunder and finding him determinedly at supper in the dining room instead of having his usual tray in the nursery, we soberly asked his permission to take tea along with him. Then Kate and I went abovestairs to tuck the lad into our own huge bed, for this too is Kentish custom and no matter how many children a house may boast they begin the Christmas watch in their mother's bed. Nostalgically I remembered that until I was well grown I did this thing, and Kate also had kept watch for jolly St. Nick until she fell asleep among her mother's quilts.

That night at dinner we sat fourteen at table. Mr. and Mrs. Travis were there, Vanningham and his sister Prudence, the Jonathan Weekses, Mary Creed and Commander Creed, the brother of her dead husband. Father Gillis and the Vicar being busy with church Christmasing, in their stead we had invited Jack and Essie Josephs, our neighbors. But aside from Jennifer and Benjamin Froste none of our guests shared in the dread things we were shortly to experience. Again we followed Old World custom at our Christmas Eve feast, and Peter served us a roasted ham in its bed of glistening apples, a cabbage steamed whole in spicy vinegars, a plum pie flaming with brandy, and as midnight approached brought to the drawing room a great silver bowl of steaming punch. We drank lustily and often to Father Christmas, and Kate, fingering the keys of Sarah Gresham's harpsichord, as had been the wont of carollers in Britain's day of peace, sang softly "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen," and in the Scots burr of her forefathers, "Auld Lang Syne." There were tears in my eyes as the ancient song rolled clear and fine from her lovely throat.

Perhaps it was the tears which angered the gods. Before the night was done we knew their wrath. In time our dinner guests went their way. For a bit we lingered with Benjamin and Jennifer, reminiscing

and laughing at childish antics on long-fled Christmases, and then, having given Jacob solemn pledge to look in on the festivities, we ascended, halting for a little peep at the children asleep in our bed. From the time of small Sarah's vanishing it had been understood night or day neither of the children was to be alone, and I had rather expected to find Rosemary York with them. But it was Ellen, shy in a grand festive garment donned for her visit to the gala, who sat beside them, and I thought it odd that one who would not shed her servant's dress for her own wedding should do so for a Christmas frolic. It was all but impossible to consider Ellen the woman we saw every day of our lives, for in her full-skirted cardinal silk gown, garnished in dusky velvets, her hair loosely coiled about her head, she was handsome indeed and vastly more fitted for the company of the painted dames on Mandrake's walls than ever she was for the merry roisterers abovestairs.

I do not at all remember the length of time we remained chatting with Ellen. She was surprisingly loquacious and, when we admired her gown, told us that it was long ago a gift from Madam Mandrake and that a gay circumstance of bestowal embraced a pledge from Ellen to don it every Christmas Eve of her life as long as it held together. When I asked of Rosemary, Ellen told me she had sent her to bed, promising that she herself would wait with the children and see to their removal into their own beds when we were ready to retire.

I would say it was well past one o'clock when we ascended by the rear stair and at the threshold of the common room halted to behold the antics of the merrymakers, particularly those of Jacob Schultz, who did not permit his newly acquired mechanical limb to bar him from vigorous capering. Shortly, with dignity and *élan*, Peter came from his station behind the punch bowl to escort us to seats of honour beside the hearth. Lighted only by candle and firelight, the long room was homely and fine. When he had done with his dancing I called Jacob and bade him tell Jennifer and Benjamin the legend of the candles, and at length he did, avowing again and again their power against evil and quoting many an incident to prove his claim. Always I had considered Jacob's tales quaint folklore, but before the night had sped I was convinced there was much to be said for the potency of bayberry.

One by one the dancers came to wish us Merry Christmas, and toast us in punch, then the fiddlers struck up a reel and in all dignity

Peter claimed his mistress for a partner, while Benjamin chose our bouncing cook, Mistress Dottie, and Jacob cavorted briskly with Jennifer. But needs must I, because of my halted limb, become a candle-holder and look on, promising myself with God's good help when Christmas came again to Mandrake I too would tread a measure.

When the vigorous dancing was done, Kate, laughing and winded, came to me. Together we again stood at the dormer and, leaning against the pane, peered at the cardboard world without, at sharply dark shadow of house walls flung across the eerie white of the terrace below, at awkward silhouette of snow-draped tree and bush, at low-hung gibbous moon, and again heard the silvery clock chime and strike. This time the hour was two.

When the music began again Froste led Kate to whirl and twirl in an old-fashioned waltz, and as I stood watching, clearly above the music and scuffle of dancing feet I heard a woman singing and thought it no more than a merry-maker caught in throes of exuberance and punch. But quickly I realized it was no common voice I heard, the song no common song. Surely and truly came the aria from *Il Trovatore* until it seemed to fill the very room. Fiddles faltered and were still. Dancers stood spellbound in frozen pattern. Turning my eyes from one face to another, seeking the answer to this incredible thing, I saw Peter's florid cheeks drain of colour, his blanched hands grip the table's edge, his body sway as if blasted by a mighty wind. And in the moment I knew Mandrake's mystery was Peter Petral'sky's also. For a moment only, the man stood and then with giant strides passed through the halted dancers towards the passageway door, and almost immediately I heard him begin hasty descent.

Turning, I found Jacob at my elbow and asked, "Do you know who is singing, Jacob, or what it's all about?"

It was well the dancers were engaged with their immediate terror, for Jacob with almost clarion crow yelled, "Spooks!"

"What?" I asked. "What did you say?"

"Could be them spooks, couldn't it now, boss?"

"Spooks?"

"Them ghosts yer always frettin' about."

"Nonsense," I told him, "that's a human voice. Have you any idea where it might come from?"

"Seems like 'twas right here in this room."

"It couldn't be the wireless?"

"Tisn't likely."

I glanced at the silent men and women, who without definite movement were drifting towards the door, at Kate's white face, at puzzled Jennifer and Benjamin Froste, and sensed terror all about me, terror which well might work mischief to all of us.

"For God's sake, get the fiddles going, Jacob," I whispered.

"What'll I tell the folks, boss?"

"Whatever you think best; anything at all to keep them from hurling themselves down the stair."

Jacob cut a caper, clapped hands and shouted, "Choose yer partners! Ladies and gents form sets! One couple over there. One couple over there. A-a-a-ll rea-a-ady! C'mon, Buck. 'Turkey in the Straw' now!" And it was to Jacob's shouted "Allaman left. Allaman right. Do-si-do," and to the sound of laughter and shuffling feet, that I followed Peter down the stair, scarce knowing that Kate was beside me or that Froste and Jennifer traced our footsteps.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

I would like accurately to set down what occurred in the hours which followed, but as God is my judge I cannot, for I do not accurately know. Certain facets of the dreadful night remain clear and distinct, a portion is confusedly remembered and perhaps mercifully so, much is altogether obscured, and for long enough I was altogether unable to add one fact to another and arrive at a sane total.

Perhaps description of the oddly constructed rear of Mandrake House will somewhat clarify the physical aspect of our plight. The ell attached to the northeast corner of the house proper is really but one storey in height, for the small glassed forcing house, or perhaps one might call it a conservatory, on the roof cannot be properly considered a second storey. The ell houses kitchen, servants' dining room, sculleries, cold room and storage cupboards, a narrow passageway and just beyond, adjoining the dining room, Peter's serving pantry. At the far end of this passage a stair descends into the cellars and at the head is a casement window facing north. At the south end a door leads into a hooded outside stairway which ascends thirty-four steps to a landing some eighteen feet in length, ten in breadth, which separates the Stephen chamber from the forcing house. At this landing the stair oddly penetrates the east wall of the house proper and ascends twenty-six steps to a second landing on the attic floor leading to a passage between the common room and the bedchambers. Directly above the window at the cellar stairhead is a large circular window, and at intervals, let into the outer wall of the hooded stairway, are three windows perhaps eighteen inches in breadth, ten in height; save electrics there is no other lighting in either passageway and at best

they are on the gloomy side. Beside the ascending stair is a door leading into the mid-corridor and this, with the one between Peter's pantry and the dining room, are the only means of gaining entrance into the house proper from the kitchen ell.

We were perhaps midway on the first flight of stairs when a peculiar whining vibration trembled the house, but in my preoccupation with the antics of Peter I was at first scarcely conscious of it. Step by step Peter descended. Step by step I followed until he halted at the door leading into the corridor of the mid-floor. Conscious that more than that which met the eye was going forwards, I also halted, curiously peering at the senseless movements of the man at the foot of the stair. Leaning at an altogether comic angle forwards, again and again he thrust his shoulder into space. Seemingly there was nothing to hinder his entrance, but enter he could not, though what halted him I did not know. From the stair where I stood I could see over Peter's head into the corridor and a more normal sight there never was. Chandelier and wall brackets were cheerily alight, a homely fire blazed on the hearth, the place seemed actually to smile. Nevertheless it was patently impossible for Peter to set foot over the threshold. I found myself shivering in sheer terror as I heard chattering teeth of Kate, of Froste and Jennifer, and it's very possible I heard my own also.

Kate tugged at my sleeve. "What is it, Stephen?" she asked. "What in the world is awry with Peter?"

I shook my head wordlessly, not venturing to turn an eye for a single instant from Peter Petralsky.

Behind me Benjamin croaked hoarsely, "What the hell goes on?"

Again I shook my head. I had no answer to toss him, no answer at all for the myriad questions swirling in my own brain.

Above the shrill "tee-dee-tee-deedle-dee-tee-tee-dee," from overhead, came Jacob's raucous voice. "Grand chain," he bellowed. "Swing yer pa-artners! *PRO-OM-e-e-na-ade a-a-a-ll.*" It was a fantastic situation, a senseless one, a stupid one. I'd do something about it at once.

"Peter," I said sharply. "*Peter!*" He neither answered nor looked towards me, but with might and main continued striving to thrust himself over the cursed threshold. Suddenly the corridor was neither homely nor normal. Huge clouds of wispy vapour swirled its length and, reaching above Peter's head, filled the landing with noxious opaque mist until our clothing was a-drip. Impulse screamed at me to flee to the safety of the attic floor, to thrust Kate before me up the

stair, to do anything in the world save for another instant to watch Peter's endless striving. But it pleases me to remember instead I forced reluctant feet to carry me forwards until I stood with him cheek by jowl. I firmly believe it was the most valiant act ever I did in my life. As I moved, so did Kate, and Benjamin and Jennifer came after, until we formed a half-circle about him.

"Do something, Stephen, for pity's sake, do something," Kate urged, unreasonably.

"What shall I do?" I whispered, and Kate, pressing palms against her temples, murmured pathetically, "I don't know. I don't know. But if I must watch Peter for another minute I shall go completely mad." Stephen Ellers-Mandrake was limitless distance in advance of her, for already he *had* gone completely mad.

From the stair I had been quite able to see the corridor's length, but on the same level with Peter his bulk blocked our view, so needs must I bend forwards to peer beneath his arm. Kate beside me also bent to peer eagerly at the portion of our bedchamber still visible through a curtain of shifting vapour. Thankfully we beheld the outline of our sleeping children, saw the shaded lamp at the bed's head, an arm of the chair where we had left Ellen keeping vigil, and then I most solemnly swear I beheld Stephen Mandrake and his dogs take form beside the open door. I touched Kate's fingers and with my head motioned towards them.

"Do you see anything?" I whispered.

"No."

"Nothing beside the door?"

Thrusting her head forwards she watched intently, then shook her head. "No," she said again. "Do you?"

"I think so."

"What?"

"Stephen Mandrake."

But the presence of a wraith, even a kindly wraith, near her children brought no comfort to Kate. Wordlessly she whimpered. I drew her close to me and then, before our very eyes, with no human hand upon it the corridor door swung slowly forwards and our incredulous ears heard bolts driven home. I sprang to my feet and before Peter's shoulder crashed against the panels, my own crashed, but against the staunch old door our efforts were as naught.

In utter agony Kate cried, "The children!" Then she, too, beat upon

the door with clenched fists, screaming, "Ellen! Open this door! Open this door! Rosemary! Rosemary! Rosemary!"

Behind me I heard Froste say, "Take your hands off me, Jen. I've stood just about all I'm going to stand," heard him go quickly down the stair. Kate, freeing herself from me, sped after him. Frantically I called to her and sought to follow, but as always my cursed body failed and I could do no more than stand at the stairhead seeking to rub life into my useless limb. Below in the passage I heard Froste rattling at the door leading into Peter's pantry, heard Kate still screaming, "Ellen, Rosemary, Ellen, Rosemary," in a frantic, endless litany.

It was an eternity until I dragged myself down to have Froste shout accusingly, "How the hell does one get out of this joint?"

"There's a door from this passageway into the kitchen and from there a door leading to the driveway. If we can get outside of the ell I'm fairly certain there'll be some manner in which we can gain the house."

"Come on," said Froste. "What are we waiting for?"

But the passageway door was firmly locked and, as we stood in frustrated misery before it, overhead lights faded into nothingness and never in God's world had there been such frightening darkness as that which enveloped us.

I do not know when I first realized Kate was no longer beside me and when I hoarsely called to her. I shall always remember how strange was my voice in the gloom. Twice and thrice I sought to grope my way to the stairway, but bemused and without sense of direction always returned to the threshold of the closed door. At the fourth try I gained the landing of the mid-corridor and found only Jennifer crouched at the stairhead weeping dismally, her terrified head cradled on her knees. Again I tried the door and as before the door remained fast.

"Peter!" I shouted. "Jacob! Frost! Kate! Where are you? For God's sake, where are you, Kate?" But Kate did not answer nor did Peter. Only Jacob dot-and-carrying down the stair and Froste calling idiotic instructions from the passage. Above the din came sound of shattered glass and then Froste's furious feet pounding in ascent, and to this day I do not know if he sought to flee from trouble or towards it. From the attic room the erstwhile merry-makers tumbled in an agony of sobs, screams and blasphemy, led by Jacob Schultz bearing a

handful of his obese candles. Pausing to drip wax over the newel post, he held a candle in it until the wax was set and staunch; a second candle he thrust into my clenched fist. Jennifer clutched at a third, Benjamin a fourth, then one and all Jacob set them alight and, drawing still other candles from his pockets, descended to the lower passage and saw to it this was lighted in the same manner.

In time to come I was to believe fervently that the homely candles possessed mystic power, but, had they served no better purpose than to dispel darkness on that dreadful night, in their making Jacob Schultz would still have wrought a benediction.

Gibing, scolding and coaxing, Jacob again herded his terrified guests up the stair, persuaded them to pile the hearth with logs, set wall sconces alight, brew new and stronger punch, and very shortly indeed music and dancing feet were weird accompaniment to our terror.

The kitchen ell was the lone portion of Mandrake House with which I was not familiar. Nevertheless, I found the window at the cellarage stairhead, drew the casement inwards and most astonishingly found the solid weather window shattered. Leaning forwards I thrust the lighted candle into the darkness but saw nothing beyond the tiny circle of its light. It was not until I withdrew it that I beheld a tatter of Kate's bright gown fastened to a shard of glass. Without hesitancy I vaulted through, the candle dropping from my hand quenched in a sputter of wax, and then, dazed by pain from my cursed limb, lay where I fell. Froste booted the remainder of the glass from the frame and lowered himself beside me. Jennifer followed after; then Jacob, who, blaspheming and incoherent, drew a flask from his pocket, thrust it between my lips, soothed and encouraged me in the manner he was wont to soothe and encourage all dumb beasts.

The night was black as the hinges of hell, but Jacob again set a candle alight and, shielding the flame with cupped palm, said tersely, "C'mon, folks," and led us from one window to the other, until we rounded the corner of the drawing room. Facing the south addition was a second shattered weather window. Before it Jacob paused, holding his candle aloft, and here also the casement had been thrust inwards. "Gimme a boost up, boss," said Jacob. "I'm goin' to git in here."

But I, teetering on painful limb, did nothing but gawp and gibber while willing others helped him through the window and passed his candle in to him. With scarce drawn breath we watched the wavering light cross the drawing room to vanish into the corridor beyond. Then

Froste and Jennifer raced pell-mell about the south addition, and I, trailing forlornly after, came to Mandrake's great door as Jacob drew its ancient bolts.

Weather-chilled to our very marrow, we crossed the threshold to hear again the soul-searing humming of the house with the added horror of angry snarling dogs. In the hall-corridor fire still smouldered on the hearth, but neither its dim glow nor Jacob's lone candle was adequate to make search for Kate—and well enough I knew Kate was in Mandrake House.

A little while we stood huddled together. Then Froste said, "Is there a gun about, or a golf stick, or any damn thing I can use for a weapon?"

Wordlessly I pointed to a weighty poker beside the hearth. He hefted it in his hand and said, "O.K. Now what about lights?"

"Lights?" I questioned stupidly.

"A flashlight or an electric torch," said Froste impatiently, "anything to light the place up enough to search it."

"There are candles," I offered. "I think Kate had all the sconces filled with Jacob's candles."

"O.K.," said Froste again. "Let's go. Got any matches, Jake?"

Jacob promptly produced a packet of lucifers and set alight candles in the branched wall sconce beside the manteltree. "What'll I do now, boss?" he asked.

It was Froste who said, "Light up the drawing room. See if anyone is hanging around in there. I'll keep Jennifer with me and search the rooms on this side. What about you, Steve?"

Beyond hunching a shoulder towards the stair I made no answer, but seizing a candle from the sconce nearest to me I began speedy ascent, hoping against hope to find Kate with the children. Kate was not with the children, for no children lay among tossed bedcovers, nor on the couch hard by the window, nor in Miss Sarah's beribboned basket. And the chair where Ellen had kept vigil lay like a stricken thing, its arms prodding the air.

For a little I went altogether mad. Where were my children? Where was my wife? Ellen? Rosemary? In senseless rage I thrust open the door of the chamber shared by Helen and Rosemary. I shouted at the very top of my voice, "Rosemary, where are you? Where have you got to, you damned little fool? For God's sake, what have you done with the children?"

And even as I shouted the voice did not seem my own but that of a stranger, while I, standing aside, listened to its echo. Holding the candle aloft I frantically peered into wardrobe and closet, bathing rooms, passageways and the day nursery beyond. Convinced the rooms held no living thing I returned to our bedchamber. Slowly the transom above the corridor door came alight, snarling of phantom dogs ceased, and once again Mandrake House was free of its terrors.

I flung the door wide and there under the glare of ceiling chandelier I saw Kate lying senseless beside the hearth, a trickle of blood staining her face. Shouting in horror I ran to her as Froste sped up the stair, but, thank God, shortly her lids were a-quiver and breath moved the laces of her gown. It was not I but Benjamin who bade Jacob ring through to Vanningham and who bore Kate to her bed, for I had become small use to anyone and sat for long enough drooling like a half-wit and futilely stroking Kate's cold hands.

Again it was Jacob who brought false strength and false courage with brandy to pour through my chattering teeth, but very much I needed courage, false or otherwise, if I was to go on at all. Unless her injury were the labour of phantoms, whoever had struck Kate down was still in Mandrake House. Fervently I prayed for wit to find him, for strength to slay him. Leaving Froste and Jennifer to attend my wife, with Jacob I again descended the stair as the corridor clock struck three. I marvelled but a single hour had elapsed since I had stood at the dormer hearkening to another clock chime and strike. Nevertheless in such time five persons, one a helpless infant, had vanished from Mandrake House. Below and abovestairs we traipsed, peering and scanning every nook and cranny which might serve as a hiding place, but the great carven dower chest in the shadowy aperture of the mid-corridor window was overlooked, though why I do not know, for God knows the search we made was thorough.

Leaving Jacob below I ascended to find how Kate was faring, and as I crossed from the stairhead towards our bedchamber beheld the lid of the chest slowly rise and seemingly malevolent eyes glare into mine. The night long I had endured horror after horror, and the eerie raising of the lid was quite the last straw. I shouted at the top of my lungs, or rather I screamed, for there was nothing male in the sound which issued from my throat. It was more akin to the shriek of an hysterical female or wail of a frustrated banshee. But it got results—one, at least, not to my advantage. Against my very nose Jennifer

slammed and bolted the bedchamber door and left me dithering on the threshold. But apparently Froste immediately dropped from the ceiling, and Jacob popped up through the floor, for I heard approach of neither one nor the other until I found them beside me.

With trembling finger I pointed towards the dreadful thing and they too beheld glittering eyes peering through the crack. Warily and abreast they advanced, threw back the lid upon small Rosemary York cowering between Stephen and Miss Sarah—and as incredible as it may seem, my son and daughter sweetly slept!

Jubilantly I smote the door, calling loudly to Jennifer to open, but she would not—not to my lone voice, her husband's or our chorused demands, and it was only when Jacob stealthily executed a flank movement by way of Rosemary's chamber that I was able to tell the blessed news to my poor Kate who until that moment did not know her babes had been missing.

In time, her plumage smoothed, Rosemary had a tale to tell, a tale so unbelievable it was altogether in keeping with the fantastic night.

"What happened?" I asked. "Go back to the beginning, Rosemary."

"One of the maids brought my dinner," she said. "I ate in the day nursery, sat there for a while reading, then went into my own room and, after I'd bathed, slipped into a robe and came to relieve Ellen. But Ellen told me to go to bed; she was going to stay up anyway and might as well be with the children. You know how Ellen is when she makes up her mind to do anything. She just kind of brushed me off and I did go to bed. I don't know how long I slept but I awakened frightened. I was sure I'd had a nightmare, and sat up in bed trying to reason myself out of it. I thought I'd go in to Ellen and maybe she'd make me feel better, but after I'd got in the room I saw Ellen wasn't there. I didn't want to wake up the kids, so I didn't call her, or at least not very loud."

I asked, "What time was this, Rosemary?"

"Not so long before the lights went out."

"Did you hear Mrs. Mandrake call?"

"I think maybe that's what woke me up, because I dreamed Stephen was yelling 'Rosemary! Rosemary! Rosemary!' as he does when he's excited about something."

"Did you notice whether the chair was overturned when you came into the bedchamber?"

"Yes, I did, and right then I made up my mind I wasn't going to

stay alone. I was going right up and get Peter, but I kept diddling around until the lights went out, and the most God-awful racket started up somewhere and I thought I heard glass breaking. I didn't know what went on, but whatever it was I didn't want any part of it. At first I thought I'd just lock all the doors, but the darned door into the little hallway stuck and while I was trying to get the bolt fixed I remembered Stephen coaxing me to let him play inside the hall chest. Maybe if I hadn't been badly scared the idea of hiding the kids there wouldn't have seemed so bright. Anyway I unlocked the hall door again and took a look-see. It was black as your hat, so I kind of groped along the wall and when I got to the chest pushed up the lid. Then I went back, got the baby, laid her blanket on the bottom—I mean the bottom of the chest, not the baby's bottom—and put her down on it. I did a return trip for Steve, shoved him in and crept in myself, pulled off my slippers, balanced one at the head and one at the foot, and lowered the lid on them so we'd have air. Then I lay down between the kids and waited for things to happen, and boy, did they!"

"What *did* happen?" I asked.

"I heard a door open. I didn't know exactly what door it was, but it sounded pretty near. Then there was a scuffling kind of walking in the hall and pretty soon someone ran up the stairs, quickly and lightly as a woman runs, the scuffling stopped, and it got so quiet you could hear a pin drop."

"What do you mean by a 'scuffling kind of walk'?"

"I don't know exactly. I guess I just mean a scuffling kind of walk. I'm not being too smart for anything either, Mr. Mandrake. It's the only way I can describe it. You know, like when people walk without lifting their feet."

"Get on with it, Rosemary."

"Then a voice said, 'Oh! Oh!' or 'Ah! Ah!' smothered-like. There was a heavy thud, the scuffling started up again and I thought sure someone was coming towards the chest. I guess I got so scared I passed out, because the next thing I knew there was light showing through the crack and people were running around like crazy and talking fourteen to the dozen. I was still scared but I couldn't play the *Bride of Lammermoor* for the rest of my life, so I pushed the lid up a little bit more. Just about that time you came zooming up the stairs, Mr. Mandrake."

"Yes, Rosemary," I said plaintively, "that *was* the time I zoomed

up the stair and may I never again behold anything so devastating as your eyes glaring at me!"

"I'm sorry," said Rosemary, with a titter.

"You may well be, you sinister moppet. I shall never again be the hardy fellow I was."

I forced a sizable draught of brandy on the still-trembling Rosemary. Topsy as a tinker she fell asleep immediately, while I, having forced an even more sizable draught on myself, went entirely wide-awake.

In time Vanningham came. Save to put a plaster on her brow, dressings for abrasions on hands and arms, there was little he could do for Kate, but I was extremely grateful for the security his presence lent Mandrake House. With Froste and Jacob I got on with my prowling. I do not remember when it first dawned that Peter also was missing, nor do I recall who made mention of the fact, but missing he apparently was, and a second hasty scanning convinced me he was neither on the attic floor, in or about the bedchambers nor below-stairs. And if either he or Ellen were in the north addition they were not living, for at intervals we assailed the door with a vigour that would awaken anyone but the dead. In forlorn hope of turning up a clue we then searched the south addition and found neither hide nor hair of the twain, and when we were come again, chilled and spent, to the house proper I knew if I were to survive the night I must bait my empty belly.

The door between passageway and kitchen was still locked, nor did Mistress Dottie know where she had mislaid the key. Wearily I bade Jacob fetch whatever thing he could lay hand upon to force the lock. When this had been done, I sent him to force the door into the north addition also. Stirring coals in the kitchen range into a blaze, I laid the kettle on to boil, and set about scanning the larder for food, then became conscious of a peculiar scratching sound seemingly just beyond the threshold. There was no light in the passage, and I feared to touch finger to wall button lest I give warning to whomever or whatever was causing the sound. I armed myself with a sturdy skillet and stepped stealthily from the lighted kitchen to the dark passageway. When my eyes became accustomed to the gloom I saw movement at the stairhead. Creeping cautiously forwards I swung the skillet in a mighty blow and with satisfaction heard it crack against a skull. A poor pale wraith whose arms dangled lifelessly, and whose clothing

hung as from a shrivelled body, teetered and peered blankly at me. "Peter!" I shouted in consternation. I grasped him by his huge middle and together we swayed and cavorted in a grotesque aimless dance until we collapsed in a tangle of limbs, to lie half-conscious on the cold hard floor, while from the kitchen beyond, the neglected kettle scolded angrily.

Came descending footsteps. A horrified exclamation. Someone bending over us croaked, "Who are you?" and without waiting for a reply flooded the passageway with light. "Peter!" gasped the shocked voice of Mistress Dottie, who forthwith, much in the manner of rolling a barrel, rolled Peter from my inert body. She propped him in a sitting position against the wall and turned her attention to me. Shortly I leaned beside Peter. Dottie, looking on us with high disfavour, remarked ambiguously, "Well, I *must* say!" She hauled us to our feet, thrust a doughty arm about each of us, and, a wavering ridiculous trio, we set forth down the passageway. In the kitchen we sat wearily, wordlessly and very surprisedly indeed regarding one another.

Dottie was the first to collect her wits. She set about brewing coffee, strong and scalding. It was only after we had swilled it into us that Peter attempted feeble explanation of his plight by murmuring he had been searching the cellars of Mandrake House for Ellen—though why he had chosen that place to search he did not say nor did I believe a jot of the fantastic tale. Nevertheless I helped him along to sprawl on the couch beside his cold hearth. With Froste and Jacob I searched every room and chamber in the north addition and found no Ellen Meadows.

I then bade Jacob rouse the stablemen and, as I beheld their swinging lanterns approach, donned cap and greatcoat and went with them. There were footprints in plenty about Mandrake House, and a weird blurred trail led from the wood to the north addition, a trail which well might have been made by the galloping feet of beast or human being. But shortly this, with our own footprints, had been obliterated, for again snow fell heavily. Learning from both Kate and Jennifer of Ellen's mysterious vanishing, Vanningham had taken it upon himself to ring through to the constabulary and so weary was I that I did not know if I was pleased he had done so, or resentful he had taken such liberty. Nevertheless when I spied the lights of their motorcar in Mandrake Lane I went quickly to waken Peter, and at the end of the couch where he lay the floor was damp with the moisture

that had dripped from his clothing. Peering closely at the still-sleeping man I saw his breeks were sodden to the knee, the hand hanging loosely beside him bruised and swollen, its skin clotted with dried blood. Against all conscience and judgment I roused and told him the constables were already at Mandrake, and indicating hand and clothing bade him swiftly to make ready for whatever was to come.

To the gentlemen of law I related all the night's fantastic series of occurrences, and again beheld stark incredulity in their glances. Vanningham, listening to what I had to tell, put into words the question patently in the minds of the constables. "Are you drunk, Mandrake?" he asked. And drunk I was, but from horror and confusion and weariness. From cellar to attic the constables searched every hole and corner of Mandrake House, and they so searched the north addition and the south addition, but as we had not, neither did they find trace of the missing Ellen. In the north addition, Peter, spruce and clean, had awaited our coming beside a great fire blazing on the hearth and the couch drawn over the sodden place on the floor. How he had disposed of his telltale garments in so short a time I did not know but they were not come upon for all the astuteness of the law.

One after another the weary merry-makers were summoned to the kitchen and questioned, and had nothing to reveal but their boundless curiosity. And then, having quaffed great beakers of coffee, and eaten all Mistress Dottie set before them, they went forth from Mandrake, their sleigh bells ringing merrily adown the lane, their voices drifting back to where the constables again fruitlessly searched the grounds in the eerie light of the Christmas dawn. Too spent to do more than scuffle my weary feet up the stair, I left them to their searching. Kate slept on, the children also, and small Rosemary still lay in tipsy slumber. There was nothing to tell, no gain in rousing them, or in permitting Benjamin and Jennifer to keep vigil beside the mid-corridor hearth, or even in remaining awake myself. I bade Jacob do whatever he might to assist the constables, Peter also. Then I went with Jennifer and Benjamin to the cursed chamber where perhaps in spirit of bravado they had persisted in sleeping, and indeed had slept unmolested every night since first they came to Mandrake House. I bade them good night, though "Good day" would have been more fitting, and left them alone while I stumbled wearily to where Kate awaited me. I had not yet reached the threshold of our bedchamber when I heard Froste howl, "Good God Almighty!" heard Jennifer scream long

and shrilly. Pausing long enough to be sure Kate, who was sleeping under sedatives, had not been disturbed, I retraced my footsteps. Beside the door Jennifer crouched, stifling her screams with hands held palms outwards against her mouth, while Froste peered down in horror at Ellen Meadows, who lay on the bed bloody and bereft of senses.

This was the morn of Christmas in the year 1943. Outside Mandrake walls full day lighted a lovely tranquil world. Within, a broken woman, come there by unfathomable means, lay stretched as in death among the silken bedcovers. Even in the terror which enveloped me I kept my wit, and God knows it was a mighty task. In no circumstances must Kate be awakened. I drew Benjamin with me into the hall-corridor, bade him hold his whist. Then I led the trembling Jennifer down the stair and into the library.

"Lie down, Jennifer," I told her. "Rest if you can. I'll be back directly."

I closed the door upon her and went wearily to summon constables from futile scanning of Mandrake grounds. "Come inside," I bade them. When they entered I nodded an answer to their wordless question, went before them to the cursed chamber. I left them hastily to seek Vanningham, whom I came upon stretched on the drawing-room chesterfield hard by the gaudy tree, most sweetly asleep with hands clasped over bulky belly. His sonorous breathing swayed the strands of Christmas garniture dangling over his brow.

Thrusting a thumb into his midriff, I said, "I say, Vanningham, wake up, will you?"

I had not raised my voice beyond its usual tone but the good doctor leapt to his feet. "What-what-what?" he roared, and indulged in a species of shadowboxing. It was quite the silliest performance ever I saw. Despite my multitudinous trouble I guffawed heartily. It did me good. I was indeed a vastly calmer man as I watched the sheepish doctor hasten towards the stair.

Then I summoned Peter. I peered intently at him as I told that Ellen had been found, and of her condition. At the moment at least I would have taken oath that whatever evil had befallen Ellen had not been wrought by her husband.

I had thought Ellen dead, but she was not dead. Peter, having folded a blanket about the rent and ragged festive gown, about the poor bruised throat and naked breasts, and tenderly about the swollen arm, with face awash with tears bore her down Mandrake stair to the waiting

ambulance and, crouching beside her, went slowly down Mandrake Lane in the bright light of Christmas Day. I had planned Rosemary's holiday to begin at midmorn, but it was not until long afterwards she set forth, and then most reluctantly. Kate was determined that nothing must foul young Stephen's Christmas and, bruised and buffeted, arose from her bed vowing that she would neither speak of the dreadful night nor listen to talk of it until the holiday was done. The demeanour which she presented to our twittering household was most certainly far and away more serene than that which clothed me as a garment. The day long I numbly followed in Kate's wake, simulating as she did joy at Stephen's proudly decked tree, and cavorting pachydermously, and I fear most unconvincingly, as I opened my Christmas parcels. In time I assisted in bestowing gratuities and gifts upon our obviously curious staff, and with no pleasure at all sat with our guests over the bounteous feast Kate had so joyfully planned.

At last the sorry day was done. In our bedchamber adorable Miss Sarah slumbered in her basket, young Stephen, well wearied, lay on the couch, both guarded by Jacob Schultz. Over our belated supper Kate and I discussed with the Frostes what had best be done to guard my family and Mandrake House from evil. Perhaps futilely it was decided continuous guard be kept, and the house lighted from cellarage to attic during the hours of darkness. Mutely I decided Peter Petralsky would not be among those elected to do sentry duty, for as to Peter Petralsky I was indeed in most equivocal frame of mind.

So, armed to the very teeth to fend off ill intent of mortals, and aided by the magic of bayberry candles alight throughout the house to fend off the ill intent of spectres, Jacob Schultz began the first watch. The whole night I wakened from uneasy sleep to hearken to his dot-and-carry above and belowstairs, and I should not have been astonished to hear him call out as did the ancient night watch, "Two o'clock and all is well," or "Three o'clock and spectres prowl." But on that night at least neither mortal nor phantom hindered Jacob in his watch and ward of Mandrake House.

Midmorn of the twenty-sixth brought a silent and disturbed Helen Tempest, and before nightfall, with the children, Kate and the Frostes she was en route to New York and the hostel which had sheltered Kate and young Stephen the preceding winter. Another night I tarried until small Rosemary returned, and with her I followed my family, leaving Mandrake in veritable state of siege. By my orders Jacob and

three of the stable crew dwelt in the attic, the common room their barracks. Two by two, turn and turn about they would patrol house and grounds at night, and leaving the fourth man to perform necessary stable labours, sleep on their cots in the common room by day. But to Peter I allotted no duties at all, telling him in my absence Jacob would be house guardian and he was altogether free to remove to Van Etten and the nearer vicinity of Ellen. I had not slept a single hour on the eve of Christmas and little enough on Christmas night, or the night following, and when I had at last joined Kate I fell asleep over my dinner and slept the clock halfway around, and it was not until December twenty-eighth that I learned in detail what had happened to Kate on Christmas Eve.



CHAPTER TWELVE

WHEN the lights dimmed for the second time Kate was in mid-descent between upper and lower corridor; someone whom she took to be Froste had passed her swiftly on the stair and almost directly she heard sound of shattering glass. She had thought it came from the forcing house over the kitchen ell, but feeling the draught on her legs remembered the window at the cellar stairhead. As quickly as might be she ran towards it and found the casement flung wide, the weather window beyond it shattered. Immediately she had sought to climb through, thinking if she could gain the outside of the house she undoubtedly would be able to force a somewhat defective latch she knew to be on one of the drawing-room windows.

When gingerly she began lowering herself to the ground, hands reached out of the darkness and, almost before she could draw breath, lifted her until she stood on her own two feet. Then she heard snow crunching as if someone walked quickly away, but when she called out no one answered her. She was of course frightened, but fright did not deter her from the thing she had set out to do—gain entrance to Mandrake House and her children.

Hurrying towards the casement, she had scarcely gained the court between the south addition and the drawing room, when suddenly she found herself face downward in the snow, altogether certain the shadowy someone who had assisted her from the casement had, for nefarious purpose, stalked and set upon her. But not for a moment was she going to permit anyone to thwart her design of getting into Mandrake House. Cautiously twisting about she pulled herself upright, so wrathful at the cowardly attack she vows she felt no fear at all but with the vigour and profuseness of a serjeant-at-arms, sat cursing

him—or it—and only when her posterior was thoroughly chill and wet did she arise and get on with the business in hand. No sooner had she taken a step forwards when down she went a second time, and on her knees found it was no unseen malefactor who had flung her to earth, but merely that she had twice tripped on the stones of a castle young Stephen had set about erecting before snow fell and covered his effort. Still on her knees she groped about until a sizable stone came to her hand. Arising, she flung it with might and main towards the weather window and heard with satisfaction sound of shattered glass, then with the agility of a prowling tom, Kate scrambled up to the sill, removed as much of the shattered glass as made the opening of the casement possible, and having found, as she had thought to find, this easy of accomplishment, thrust the casement wide and with small effort vaulted into the drawing room.

For a little she stood hearkening for suspicious sound, but at first heard nothing more alarming than the solemn ticking of the corridor clock. It was only when she had cautiously crossed the drawing room and gained the hall-corridor that she became aware of the humming vibrations of the house and sound of snarling dogs, seemingly in the corridor above stairs, but even this frightening thing did not halt her. A fire still smouldered on the hearth, and, pausing only long enough to stir it into a blaze to light her way, she sped up the stair.

Mandrake's electrics were still nonexistent and the mid-corridor was dark as a pocket. Extending her arms at full length she began to grope her way across it. Then suddenly a hand was thrust over her mouth, an arm about her middle. Someone began dragging her back towards the stair. As well as might be she resisted, and then resisted no more, for her head struck a hard surface and the world was blotted out. But before consciousness left her she had been quite certain someone was coming towards her up the stair.

"Have you any idea who it might be?"

"Not the least, but I think it was a rather heavy man."

"The same man who molested you in the hall-corridor?"

"My word, no! Whoever was in the corridor seemed a great deal more like an animal. A bear walking on his hind legs, maybe, or a whacking great ape."

By Jove! I thought. Whacking great apes and grizzly bears added to spectres, ghosts and goblins sum up to what? Not knowing what it summed up to I held my peace and permitted Froste to get on.

"Why do you think it might have been an animal?" he asked.

"I don't really suppose I thought at all, but there was the same sort of sour thing about that one smells at zoos."

"Did you notice the smell when you were getting out of the window?"

"No, I didn't." And then Kate most astonishingly added she was quite convinced the person who had helped her through the window was Dr. Vanningham.

I blurted, "Why, it couldn't possibly be. You were with me at the door when he drove off with Prudence. I quite remember we stood looking about until after the motorcar lights vanished round the turn."

"I know," said Kate, stubbornly. "All the same I'm sure it was Dr. Vanningham who was at the window. I should recognize his touch, you know. I've felt it often enough."

And it was suddenly borne upon me that I knew very little indeed about either Vanningham or his sister, and strangely Froste fitted words to my thoughts by saying, "How much do you know of this fellow Vanningham?" He asked it more of me than of Kate, but it was Kate who answered.

"I know he is an excellent physician, of course—beyond that little, really, but there's something so very right about him it's unnecessary to know anything more."

"Why did you select Vanningham to attend you?"

"Why, he rather selected me. He introduced himself at the chemist's in Van Etten, said he'd taken care of Madam Mandrake and would be very happy to look after us if such need arose."

"You never told me that, Kate," I said rather pettishly.

"Should I have? Perhaps I did not think it was important enough to make a point of chatting about it."

Turning from Kate, Froste said to me, "You didn't know Vanningham had attended Madam Mandrake?"

"How could I know if no one told me?"

"Neither Peter nor Ellen mentioned it?"

"No. On the contrary they rather gave me the impression Madam was so far gone in illness she considered medical attendance useless."

"That's odd," said Froste, "very odd indeed, but it's my experience that the more desperately ill people are, particularly women and emphatically elderly women, the more medical attendance they de-

mand. I tell you, Steve, to my mind the combination of Peter, Ellen and Vanningham stinks."

"What makes you think there is a combination?"

"It's as plain as the nose on your face," said our intrepid attorney, and before I could protest my nose was considered far from plain, Froste attacked from a new angle.

"Did Vanningham himself ever tell you he attended Madam Mandrake?"

"If he did, I don't remember his doing so."

"Was it Vanningham who introduced the fair Prudence? Now *there's* a gal," said Froste with a grin.

Jennifer sniffed. "I thought Benjy would get around to the fair Prudence. You know my little Benjy," she informed us, "rather fancies himself a wolf."

"A *what?*"

"Wolf. You know, like this," and Jennifer thrust back her head and howled outrageously. "Get me?" she asked.

"Sorry, don't believe I do."

"Oh, dear me!" said Jennifer. "Britishers are so difficult to talk to!"

Froste smugly lighted a cigarette. "Suppose we by-pass my wolfish proclivities and defects of the British citizenry and get on with the business in hand. Spill what you know about Pru."

Feverishly I searched my mind and found I personally knew nothing at all about the lady. Not so Kate.

"Prudence is really a dear," she said. "The excessive sophistication is an armour she dons when she thinks there is danger of being hurt."

"Did she tell you that?" I asked.

"Of course not."

"How did you arrive at that conclusion?"

And Kate answered ambiguously, "She is so fond of the children."

"In these United States," remarked Jennifer to no one in particular, "it is the custom of politicians to run around kissing little babies and chucking them under the chin, or maybe it's the baby's mama who gets chucked. Anyhow there's kissing and chucking going forwards. Catch?"

Jennifer's irrelevant remark made no sense to me but Kate laughed and said, "I rather fancy that is not the case with Prudence."

"No?" inquired Jennifer. "Well, babe, I'm warning you to watch your step. That's quite a beautiful big hunk of husband you have."

"Are you playing verbal charades?" I asked, and Froste remarked Jennifer had a gift for breaking down intelligent conversation to utter drivel. "Or maybe it isn't a gift," he added. "Maybe it's a mental affliction."

And Jennifer, pointing dramatic finger at her husband, wailed idiotically, "Him doesn't like him's little Jennie." But thereafter she quieted and left us to weigh fact against fancy, surmise against actualities, and at the end of lengthy hours of most ponderous chitchat we had arrived at precisely nowhere.

Despite the manifestation he had witnessed on Christmas Eve Froste clung stubbornly to the theory that in the main Mandrake's ills were caused by human agency, an agency which for its own purpose was determined to thrust us from Mandrake House, although reluctantly he conceded he had not as yet arrived at logical solution of the many strange things which he had witnessed.

I, on the other hand, avowed while human agency might well enter into the disturbance, mainly it stemmed in visitants from another world, phantom, spectre, ghost or goblin—call them what he would.

So acrimonious was our argument I bitterly wished the time might come when Benjamin with his own eyes might behold as I had beheld the spectral Stephen, the wraith of Caroline or the frisking phantom dogs, and having beheld therefore be afraid. And I found it in my heart to hope when he next crossed Mandrake's threshold he would witness such phantasmagorical pyrotechnics as to make him forever a humble follower of Conan Doyle, Annie Besant or other persons reputedly on friendly terms with the wandering dead.

For the nonce I decided if we were all to retain our sanity we must thrust Mandrake's bleary mystery from mind, and thrust it we did for a full seven days and a goodish portion of the nights, though occasionally I spent hours between dark and dawn struggling with it as valiantly as ever St. George struggled with his dragon. And I must confess there were moments when I envied the chap, for at least a dragon was something one might set one's teeth into.

For seven days industriously by our lone and in company of Benjamin, Jennifer and countless hordes of their friends, we lunched, dined, theatred and danced, and then went again to Mandrake House. Entirely against my will Kate returned with me. I had been wishful she remain safely with the children, but she would not be gainsaid, and on January seventh we stepped from the railroad carriage at Van

Etten to be assured by Jacob that all had gone well in our absence. This, however, proved to be something of a fallacy, for the queer events of Christmas Eve had been heralded far and wide by Jacob's dizzy guests, and notwithstanding petrol restrictions motorcars bearing ungodly numbers of prying persons crept up Mandrake Lane, slowly circling the house as gap-mouthed as if ephemeral coryphées endlessly danced a ballet on the terrace. From the wood's beginning to the lane's end the snow had been trampled into filthy muck, which so annoyed me I bade Jacob see to it Mandrake's gate was closed and secured against intruders.

As soon as might be with Kate I again set about determined search for anything having bearing on the puzzling conditions under which, needs must, we lived. I well knew it would be useless to probe Peter regarding the state of his clothing or his fantastic explanation of absence on Christmas Eve. But with Vanningham's permission we visited Ellen in the hospital and sought to wrest from her knowledge of her assailant, for I was convinced the same person had attacked both Ellen and Kate. Ellen, altogether disavowing such knowledge, clung tenaciously to the tale already told the constables: that hearing unusual sounds in the Caroline suite she had crossed the corridor, and opening the door sought to turn on the electrics, but before she could touch a finger to the wall button someone had stricken her down. More than that she did not know, nor did she know how her clothing had been rent, her injuries inflicted, or by whom the chair had been overturned. And in time we went away from Ellen, vowing she lied by the clock, that she was a sly, misleading woman, her thin lips withheld that which might very well serve to rid Mandrake of its evil, and then shamefaced confessed to each other that despite all this there was much in Ellen Meadows to love.

In our absence three of our four handmaidens had fled Mandrake. The fourth, Jacob's dear fancy, buxom Mistress Dottie, seemed to have accepted the situation with unusual good sense and had manifested a doughty spirit by sleeping for seven nights on the attic floor in close proximity to lusty males, and thereafter sleeping in the same place in close proximity to no one at all.

Our sadly depleted staff made the closing of rooms and bed-chambers not in actual use a necessity, and only our bedchamber, the two corridors and the library remained as they had been. Deciding to forego the large and empty dining room until our family was

reassembled I had bidden Peter to serve our food either at a table beside the library hearth or in our bedchamber. Bag and baggage Jacob had removed from his cottage to the common room, but at night he lay on the settle drawn from the hearth to a space beside our door, or prowled throughout the house, industriously seeking for spectres on whom he might try potency of certain spells and incantations he had set himself to learn. But for the nonce spectres and their kind continued to absent themselves from Mandrake and, save Jacob, I'll take oath no one regretted them.

The days lying between our return and January eleventh were altogether uneventful. On the night of that date we sat late poring over Mandrake's books and papers, and at last tiring Kate gathered them together and, locking them away in the tall secretary, said pettishly, "You know, Stephen, I am altogether sure the key to Mandrake's mystery lies in Stephen's letters if we were intelligent enough to ferret it out."

I made no answer but, drawing aside the heavy curtaining, stood peering at stark stencilling of winter-stripped trees against the snow. In time I thought there was movement among the shadows, perhaps no more than a swaying branch, but nevertheless I called Kate to the window and asked, "Do you see anything unusual out there?" Before she could answer a grotesque silhouette flashed across our vision and seemingly vanished around the corner of the north addition.

"What in the world is that?" gasped Kate.

"I don't know," I answered nervously. "Shout up Jacob, will you, Kate?"

And then before our startled eyes, for a second time the monstrous shadow passed and vanished, and in a trice Kate was speeding the stair, calling to Jacob. But when she returned it was not Jacob, but Mistress Dottie who trailed her and, as bashfully as if she were relating indiscretion of Jacob towards herself, said, "I guess Jake's taking a bath, Mr. Mandrake. I heard water running in the bathroom. You want I should get him out?"

Even as I answered that very much did I wish Jacob to be hauled from his untimely ablutions, I found myself witlessly considering how Jacob was wont to deal with the bathing of his peg leg. Did he take it with him into his tub, I wondered, or bathe it alone and apart? Or did he merely stand it entirely unwashed in a convenient corner while he laved his carcass? But casting such fanciful brooding from

mind I sent Mistress Dottie hastily to summon him, and Kate to knock up Peter. It was Peter, clad in a magenta damask robe so staidly elegant he might have served the most formal of dinners in it and lost no jot of dignity, who first came.

"Is there a light in the north addition, Peter?" I asked.

"Why, no, sir. Ellen and I retired several hours ago. May I ask if there's anything amiss, sir?"

"There was a reflection of someone moving across the snow just outside the addition and I thought possibly you were walking about before a lighted window."

"I'm quite sure there has been no light in my quarters for some time, sir."

"Will you see if there are lights in any of the mid-floor chambers, Peter?"

Peter returned immediately to report that save the hearth fire in the corridors there was no light in Mandrake House, and moreover all window draperies throughout the house were drawn.

"Stand guard at the window, Peter. I'm going outside," I told him, but before I could don greatcoat and cap Jacob appeared, trailed by Mistress Dottie.

"What's cookin', boss?" he asked happily. "More spooks?"

"No, prowlers abroad, Jacob. Come along and we'll have a look for them."

"I'm going too," announced Kate.

"Indeed you are *not* going too," I told her, and bade Mistress Dottie to accompany Kate to her bedchamber, see to it the doors were made fast and there remain until my return. Though Kate protested she obeyed.

Once outside the door I halted only for such time as was necessary to have eyes become adjusted to the eerie snow-lighted world, then turning to Jacob said, "I'll see to the south side, you to the north, and we'll travel the house around and about in widening circles, passing each other at the rear. Do you understand what I mean?"

"Sure," said Jacob. "Just don't git goin' too fast. You gotta gun, boss?"

"I hadn't thought of a gun."

"Well, I've got mine. If you find anyone around that shouldn't be, just yelp out and I'll come a-tootin'."

But as it happened it was not I who "yelped out," nor Jacob who

came "a-tootin'." Quite the reverse, in fact. I was perhaps midway about the south addition when most ungodly sound smote my ears, gathering volume as I loped back the way I came, and within a dozen yards I knew it was Jacob's voice raised in frightful, agonized expletive.

"Flamin' hell!" he bellowed, "cockeyed flamin' hell!" Just under the great plane tree which shades the north addition I came upon Jacob, struck to earth, his fur-capped head protruding comically from between the rounds of a long ladder.

"What's amiss, Jacob?" I breathlessly inquired.

"Ladder," he said tersely. "Help me to git it off, boss."

When Jacob was at last extricated, without awaiting further questioning he said, "Damn ladder! Musta bumped agin it. Scared the hell outta me, it did. Wonder who left it there anyways?"

Who left it there, or who did not, at the moment seemed unimportant. I made no answer. When Jacob again clasped his gun in the crook of an arm, we began anew to search the grounds in ever-widening circles, but came upon nothing and no one. The double field gate which divides Mandrake's rear driveway from the narrow Feddows road stood open and I turned into it, calling Jacob to follow, and had not proceeded fifty yards when I became convinced there was someone lurking in a thicket topping the rise.

I waited until Jacob caught me up, then said, "I'm quite sure there's something just beyond the road."

He answered only with a nod, but with gun cocked and ready went cautiously beside me until we came upon a motorcar backed well into the undergrowth and facing the road. Levelling the gun, Jacob shouted; "If yah know what's good fr yah, c'mon out!"

No one answered his challenge, nor did they reply to a second and profane demand to show themselves. Going quickly to the motorcar we found it to be without occupants, and the door beside the wheel wide-flung. There was no key in the ignition and, save a placard stating such had been applied for, no licence plates.

"I don't fancy this at all, Jacob," I said, "and I don't know what to make of it."

Jacob pushed forwards his fur cap until it rested against his bushy eyebrows, and scratched his naked poll. "Me neither, boss. Wonder where the hell the guy who belongs to this jitney has got himself to."

I wondered also, though I had no doubt at all the motorcar was the property of the person whose silhouette I had beheld, and angrily made up my mind not easily or without explanation would he regain possession of it.

"Do you suppose we can thrust it down the rise?" I asked. "If it can be made to roll through I'll fasten the gate and let the owner whistle awhile for his vehicle."

"Kin beat that, boss," replied Jacob. He directed me to do thus and so while he, lifting the bonnet, fumbled about until the motor coughed and roared. Then leaping agilely beside me he kept up a running fire of comment while I eased the motorcar down the rutted road to Mandrake driveway, and thence to the carriage house. Once inside, Jacob flooded the place with light and stood peering silently and intently at the long rangy vehicle. He said meditatively, "I thought I knew every danged automobile in Dutchess County, but I don't know this one."

"I'm not too terribly familiar with American motorcars, Jacob. What sort would you say this was?"

"Cadillac, '41 convertible. I guess it's about the last model they put out. Look at the red leather on them seats, bet a dollar 'twar custom-made. Wouldn't surprise me none if it cost four-five thousand bucks. Dandy car, all right."

"Well, custom-built or not, the owner is going to do a bit of explaining about trespass and all that before he turns a wheel of it again."

But it was no more than a matter of minutes before I knew full well to whom the mysterious motorcar belonged. As I eased myself from the driver's seat, unwittingly I booted a packet from car to carriage-house floor and, wordlessly pocketing it, bore it with me to Mandrake House, and I was not at all astonished to discover it belonged to Vanningham, for subconsciously, I had been certain the bulky silhouette was that of the doctor.

I said nothing of my find to Kate nor to Jacob but wrote at length to Froste telling him of the occurrence. No sooner did he have my letter when he rang through saying he would arrive on the afternoon of the fifteenth. Following his advice I immediately dropped in on Vanningham, and to my complete astonishment after the usual preamble of "How are you?" and "I'm tops, thank you," and so on, Van-

ningham abruptly began telling of the theft of a motorcar. According to his tale he had come upon a decent Cadillac in Albany and decided to purchase it for his sister. Leaving his own car to be looked over, he had driven the Cadillac towards home, paused at Scarletville for a professional visit and then, seeking to shorten his way to Van Etten, turned into the Feddows Road to gain Mandrake Lane and the highway beyond. Midway between the motor failed and when effort to start it proved futile he had eased the car into a thicket and trudged back to Scarletville where, in his own idiom, he had "thumbed a ride."

He did not seem so perturbed by theft of the motorcar as by a wallet lost on the road, where he did not know. When I asked him to describe it he appeared puzzled, but did so readily, though he did not mention the contents. When I drew it from my jacket he peered at me as astonished as if in the manner of magician I had produced a rabbit from my hat and, apologizing for so doing, hastily reassured himself of the contents. But it seemed to me a man might without apology be expected to reassure himself of the contents of a wallet which contained the somewhat amazing sum of ten one-thousand-dollar gold certificates. Rightly or wrongly, I too had thumbed the pristine crackling money, but I did not tell him so nor did I tell him I had labelled him "suspicious character" and placed him in the category of Peter Petralaky.

When I had assured him the missing motorcar was safely in Mandrake's carriage house, I left him, first casually asking the name of the vendor from whom he had purchased it. Without reluctance he gave it. When I returned to Mandrake I lost no time in ringing through, and in detail the vendor confirmed the purchase of the Cadillac, even mentioning there had been no licence other than a paper placard bearing notice such had been applied for.

No sooner had I replaced the telephone when Vanningham rang me, asking I keep the finding of his wallet secret, and the motorcar also. Rather sullenly I replied that I could see no virtue in chatting about it, but called attention to the fact that Jacob also knew of the motorcar hidden in the thicket. Then abruptly I bade him good-bye and replaced the telephone, wondering why Barry Vanningham should carry ten thousand dollars in his pocket, wondering was it truly his silhouette I had beheld, wondering if like to the mountain I had not groaned and brought forth a mouse.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I N THAT winter it seemed to me more snow fell than had fallen in my whole life, and always was I divided between exhilaration at its beauty and despair because of its hardships. On the day of Benjamin Froste's arrival, just before teatime, it began to snow rather lightly but at midnight all trace of trampling yokel feet had been obliterated and Mandrake was born anew. Shortly the storm turned into blizzard and a monstrous gale howling down from the mountains tore great branches from Mandrake Wood, tossing them like chaff over the grounds, whistled about chimney-pots, rattled angrily at door and casement, in tremendous gusts stormed down the chimney scattering glowing embers over the hearth and drawing the flames upwards in a mighty roar. Kate at the window, peering into the density of whirling snow, remarked it was an elegant evening for gyrations of plain and fancy spectres. But spectres continued their shy withdrawal, and with nothing more alarming to trouble us than grotesque fire shadows dancing on the wall and an occasional hearty snore from Jacob on his perch beside our door, we fell asleep.

In the morning snow was drifted to a man's height against the house walls and lay knee-deep in Mandrake Lane, and our somewhat disgruntled guest found himself housebound, for until Mandrake Lane was cleared of drifts it was impossible to win through to the highway. All the day and far into the night we considered, argued and chatted without too much agreement, since Froste still pish-toshed the idea that Stephen, his dogs and Caroline Phillips roamed Mandrake House, vowed the only spirits to which he lent countenance were those found in the bottom of his glass, and persisted in his declaration that the corridor door had been barred, electrics foully dealt

with and Kate and Ellen assailed by human power only. Why, he did not know, but he proposed to find out. Despite their long service with Madam Mandrake he nourished dire suspicion that Peter Petral-sky and Ellen Meadows were in the affair up to their ears—and perhaps Jacob Schultz as well. When I inquired if he supposed Ellen had garrotted herself and caused fracture to her own arm, he muttered ambiguously, "Thieves fall out," but I noticed he had evinced no further desire to sleep in the Caroline suite, and it was by his own wish he occupied the bedchamber adjoining our own.

Throughout the night the storm continued to howl about Mandrake's eaves. In the morning the drifts were higher and the lane even more impassable. The forenoon long Benjamin prowled above-stairs and below. What he expected to come upon I do not know, but his explorations were as futile as his supposedly adroit quizzing of Peter and of Jacob Schultz. As Benjamin wished to have such quizzing appear casual, he intimated my absence and Kate's would be welcome and so we remained entirely missing. But I confess to chuckling when I remembered the cleverness of both Peter and Jacob in parrying questions they had no wish to answer. And well enough I knew Benjamin would come off second-best. By midafternoon of the second day the frustrated man had given over attempt to wrest information from men of better wit, and suggested exercise. Well bundled, we set forth. Space lying between Mandrake House and the wood to the north was wind-swept of snow, but such wind made walking difficult. I had not travelled a full score yards when I was forced to acknowledge that as yet I was unable to cope with sub-zero temperature and a gale blowing countless miles per hour, and so needs must I turn back again. Benjamin, however, was not content to do likewise, and figuratively beating lusty chest and emitting Tarzanian cries he continued his trek, while Stephen of the halted limb returned contentedly enough to pipe and book and blazing hearth.

Towards dusk, cramped from too lengthy sitting, I arose to stretch and stamp about. Halting at a window to peer entranced at shadows of oncoming night, I became conscious of a person approaching at a lumbering gallop from Mandrake Wood. As he neared the house to my astonishment I saw it was Benjamin. At first I thought he was merely taking a brisk warm-up, but his obvious excitement sped me to throw open the door.

"I say, you're winded!" I exclaimed. "What's up?"

But Benjamin, flinging himself wordlessly into a chair, seemed too much on the verge of apoplexy to give answer. I bade Peter fetch the brandy bottle and saw to it my winded guest swilled a hearty draught. When he'd had a breather I asked again what was up, and in utter disbelief heard him gasp, "There's a dead man up there in the woods!"

His words hung on the air like capricious, disconnected icicles. Benjamin was far from being a jokester but the thing he had just told was so utterly incredible it *must* be a jest, and so I dealt with it.

"Fancy that," I said sarcastically.

"I tell you there is, Steve. A damn dead man is stretched out on the snow, believe it or not."

"You're spoofing, Benjamin."

"Spoofing, hell! Can't you get it through your dim brain that a cadaver is lying within stone's throw of this room?"

"Where?" I asked, still unconvinced.

"You know where a big clump of pines grows right out to the cliff edge?"

"There are several clumps. Which one do you mean?"

"Damned if I know. I think it's the one nearest the house."

I argued no more with Benjamin, but rang Peter's bell. When he answered I demanded Jacob Schultz, and very shortly indeed came the dot-and-carry of Jacob's peg leg—and never do I hear his uneven tread but from the murky depths of my subconscious I produce Kipling's plauditory lines to the intrepid Gunga Din. Having bade Froste repeat verbatim what he had already told me I sat mumbling:

"'E would dot an' carry one
Till the longest day was done;
An' 'e didn't seem to know the use o' fear.
If we charged or broke or cut,
You could bet your bloomin' nut . . ."

and then as always the last line completely escaped me, and as Jacob hastily set forth, *sotto voce* I continued to mutter, "You could bet your bloomin' nut, you could bet your bloomin' nut" until Froste said belliciously, "Don't call *me* a blooming nut, Mandrake, there is a dead man up there in the trees."

"I didn't call you any such thing, Benjamin," I offered placatingly.

"Well, what are you whispering about?"

"Merely soliloquizing, Benjamin, merely soliloquizing," I told him, but Benjamin refused to be placated and retorted, "Soliloquizing, hell," in a very disagreeable tone indeed.

"Suppose you cease heckling me," I said with great dignity, "and describe what sort of chap you think you stumbled over."

"Blast it," he shouted, "how many times have I got to tell you I don't *think* I stumbled over anyone. I *know* I did and a pretty damn dead chap he was if I know anything about it."

"You didn't look over him?"

"Look over him? Why, damn it, I *fell* over him!"

"You *what*?"

"I saw a place where the snow had been pretty much swept away and turned off there towards the river. I hadn't gone more than a dozen yards when I stumbled against something and took a header. Thought it was a log, but when I grabbed hold to push myself up I found myself clutching a pair of legs. Cripes!" said Benjamin. "That's the most damned awful thing that ever happened to me!"

"What did you do?"

"Ran like blazes. What would you expect me to do—hang around and play patty-cake with him?"

"You should have made sure he was dead."

"Dead, hell! He's frozen as stiff as a Newfoundland cod."

I poised the bottle questioningly over Benjamin's glass, and he silently held four closed fingers aloft to gauge the drink, but I needed no measure for my own, well knowing the quantity necessary to lend stability to a wavering world. Then to our credit, or discredit, we gulped the brandy neat and thereafter waited several eternities for the return of Jacob Schultz.

In time he came, and without awaiting my questions, said briefly; "Yep."

"What do you mean by 'Yep,' Jacob?"

"Well, like Mr. Froste here says, there's a fella up there in the woods an' he's dead."

"Do you know who it is, Jacob?"

"Nope."

"You are sure the man's dead?"

"Deader'n a mackerel."

"Was he . . . ?" I began, but before I could ask my dread question, Jacob answered it for me.

"Mighta died natural," he said, "froze or something, or he mighta been bumped off. Can't tell."

"What's best to do, Jacob?"

"Phone the troopers, I guess. If you don't wanna, I will. Coroner's gotta see the guy before they can shift him anyway."

But I chose to acquaint the gentlemen of law myself of our need of their presence, wondering the while if the corporeal body lying in Mandrake Wood had been, or was still, abiding place of one of our prowling spectres. Lest we again be beset by curious hordes, I shrouded my demands for the constabulary in ambiguous terms. When upon arrival they learned of our newest mystery, had not Benjamin Froste, in guise of an anointed barrister-at-law, stood between me and such act, I am quite sure that on general principles, and to a man, they would have seized upon my person and cast me into their very deepest dungeon. And I cannot say I would overmuch have blamed them. In space of months, in immediate proximity to me, an infant had mysteriously vanished, a woman been badly mauled, a second seriously injured, two dead bodies been come upon, and I had little doubt a decidedly Boris Karloff-ish aura hovered about me.

As night fell the death cart came slowly through the drifts of Mandrake Lane, but depth of snow made it impossible for it to go beyond the driveway. While we sat at dinner, from the shadow of Mandrake Wood a dreary cortège moved silently towards the waiting cart, and the slow-paced men bearing the poor body, their path lighted only by swinging lanterns, made as gruesome a bit of melodrama as ever I beheld and did nothing to improve our appetites. Bright and early the morning following, by due legal procedure we were again bidden to attend a coroner's inquest and give testimony in a matter of which we knew nothing. To me, at least, coroners' inquests had become very bad hat. As there was nothing I might do to fend off such thing, I assumed a carefree attitude altogether fictitious.

The inquest was set for two o'clock. In the morn of the same day Froste decided a visit to Ellen in the hospital was necessary, for a reason which he did not impart to me. Ellen was charmed. She was certain our arrival was portent of her immediate return to Mandrake, and when unhappily I explained her release was the affair of Dr. Vanningham, with a very British sniff presumably at hospitals in general, and Vanningham in particular, Ellen retired within herself, and thereafter frostily said nothing at all. Whatever purpose Benjamin

had in mind was altogether defeated. He continued to insist, however, that Ellen was a female villain of the first water, that she knew more than ever she had told of the fantastic Christmas Eve and, furthermore, he was now certain Ellen herself had slain the dead man and received her hurt in battle with him. As Ellen weighs a sparse seven stone, unless the corpse turned out to be that of a dwarf, I greatly—but mutely—doubted such assertion.

On return to Mandrake we lunched, and then, with Kate tucked between Froste and myself, set out for the inquest. I tooled the cobs leathered to the small sleigh, leaving Jacob to transport the remainder of the household in any manner he saw fit, and wondered smugly enough how Benjamin would feel riding with me were he aware that in a quarter of a century I had never drawn rein over a horse's back.

In due time and in Van Etten's town hall, one and all we were solemnly sworn, so help us God, we had neither murdered the dead character nor had knowledge of one who did, or knew of circumstance concerned with his taking off. And insofar as Van Etten's yokels were concerned, we might just as well have kept our collective mouth shut, for to them we were all guilty, damned guilty, so why waste time talking about it? Why not just have a mass hanging and be done with the silly affair?

Perhaps it would be as well to exclude Jacob from the blanket avowal of ignorance concerning the identity and death of the man lying so unconcernedly in the town hall basement. Jacob denied nothing, but then neither did he affirm anything. He talked, and he talked, and he talked, but never did he utter a word of sense, use, or value. Adroitly he dodged questions altogether, or replied by asking others, and entirely without encouragement named day and date, victim and accused, sentence or acquittal, of every murder committed in the Hudson Valley for a hundred years. One and all he addressed the representatives of law and order by uncouth pseudonym and "Bud," "Hank," "Doc," and "Spike" rolled from his tongue as freely as the tobacco juice spat into the bucket beside him. More than once Froste turned a speculative eye upon Jacob. Almost I could hear him reason, "A shrewd fellow, this Schultz," and one might well behold the aura of crime glowing brightly about Jacob's bald poll.

Ellen, still confined to the hospital, had also been fair game for the law's suspicion, and betimes, one, two or even three canny constables

came to heckle her into unwary admittance that her injuries were mysteriously linked to the dead man. Her sworn testimony to the contrary in due time was submitted to the judicial body who, without formality of retiring, solemnly made known facts already quite patent, that on an undetermined date, by person or persons unknown, an unidentified man had been done to death. To the chagrin of our fellow townsmen we were therefore free to get on with the business of living.

Despite, or perhaps because of, my chary telephone conversation with the constabulary, the finding of a second body almost on our threshold immediately spread far and wide. While Mandrake's gate was still fastened we were beset by hordes of morbidly curious persons who swarmed down the Scarletville road and overran our premises, and it was because of this I had protested against leaving Mandrake altogether unguarded during our absence at the inquest. Peter's suggestion that one portion of the household be permitted to tell what they knew or did not know, and thereafter depart, while the second portion was en route for a similar purpose—thus for a minimum of time leaving the house unguarded—seemed to me quite logical, but the law did not agree, offering as substitute to place Mandrake under protection of a trio of constables. As this was the best bargain I could make I accepted.

It was approaching nightfall when the business of the inquest was got over with, and with Kate and Froste I set out towards Mandrake House. The brisk winter air, snow crunching beneath the sleigh, and the cheery tinkle of its bells in a manner compensated for the dreary hours we had endured. At the lane's turn we were well in advance of the vehicles bearing the remainder of the household; therefore when I beheld the house alight from cellar to attic, I was amazed. Cracking the whip over the cobs I sought with might and main to turn into the drive circling the house, but no power on earth had ever been able to force them nearer than the rear road leading to the carriage house, and to the carriage house we had to go. There throwing the leathers to Froste, as quickly as might be I hurried the remainder of the way on foot.

When I found the door unlocked, I thrust it wide open, unwittingly felling a brace of constables huddled against it. The third constable, evidently of hardier spirit, stood with legs a-spraddle, gun cocked, at the newel post, demanding in resounding tones whoever

was abovestairs immediately descend and surrender. Even in my disturbed state of mind I found the little man vastly comic. Before I had opportunity to make inquiry as to the trouble, the door was violently opened a second time, and again the two constables were felled like ninepins, but on this occasion either one or both clutched me. I went down also and sat frustratedly wondering why I so often found myself in vastly undignified positions.

It was Jacob who had stricken us to earth, and Jacob who, having assisted me to gain my legs, happily dot-and-carried behind me as I sped up the stair to do violence to whatever marauder I came upon. But hasty search of attic and mid-floor disclosed nothing awry, and in time we descended to find the men of law huddled together in the middle of the floor, Kate teetering on the toasting seat, and Froste somewhat nervously pacing the corridor. When I said that apparently there was no one and nothing unusual abovestairs, the constables one and all avowed that towards dusk they had plainly heard scuffling feet on the mid-floor and so had ascended and searched every nook and cranny of it, and of the attic floor also. After finding nothing awry they had descended and again settled themselves in the drawing room. A second time they heard the sound, and again searched without result. But the third time the footsteps passed over their heads they did nothing beyond demanding that the person show himself. If position was indicative, I am quite sure had anyone responded to their summons, all three gentlemen would have immediately fled.

Both Rosemary and Kate had spoken of hearing "scuffling" footsteps on Christmas Eve and I was more alarmed at the constables' tale than ever I would admit. But chaffing them somewhat, I sent them sheepishly about their business. No sooner had the door behind them closed when the household also went about their business. Mine at the moment was to see Benjamin had a heartening sup in his glass, and I in mine. In time we had a second and a third, and shortly had relapsed into pleasant lethargy, but even in somnolent state I became conscious of movement reflected in the burnished wood of library panelling. I considered a bit to find if the reflection could be that of Peter moving about the dining room, but decided this was not possible. I knew Kate was abovestairs, and abovestairs I could hear Jacob replenishing the hearth, and, save Froste, Peter, myself and Mistress Dottie in her kitchen, there was none other present in Man-

drake House. There seemed little doubt our phantoms were again on the prowl. I rather pettishly wished they would be content to haunt at certain established hours, or in the present instant remain inactive until my yawning belly was filled, for long ago I had found, being forced to consider, that perambulations of phantoms, spectres and so on were most upsetting to digestion.

Deciding Benjamin had endured enough of woe for one day, I said naught of shimmering shadows, and arising sauntered forwards until I could command a decent view of the hall-corridor. Here also I beheld wraithlike reflection, and had impulse to shout Jacob's battle cry, "The spook!" But the spook might well be no more than shadow of smoke from the hearth, trees without the window, or swaying curtains, and I thought I would do well to hold my peace until I made certain what was causing the flickering effect in library and corridor. When I crossed to the dining room by way of the small passage, I saw the door of the reception room was closed, and in the dining room found only Peter and leaping flames and by no manner of means could either project their shadow around the corner.

I kept on with my sauntering. I passed through the dining room to the door leading into the mid-corridor, and from such place beheld what I thought to be a woman ascending the stair. Plainly I could hear Mistress Dottie warbling tunelessly among her skillets, Kate in the mid-corridor chatting with Jacob. All Mandrake's inmates were accounted for. With best speed I made for the stair, but before I could begin ascent found Peter at my elbow. It seemed to me he deliberately thrust himself before me, and it was necessary to elbow him aside before I was able to gain the stair. I had not gone more than midway when I heard Jacob's sudden blasphemous shout, "*Almighty Lord! Ho-lee Jeepers Creepers!*" and the sound of fire tongs clattering brazenly against the hearth. Almost in unison came Kate's wordless witchlike shriek, and if such thing be possible I was galvanized into speedier ascent. At the stairhead I caromed against Ellen Meadows or her material ghost. Stock-still with amazement Kate gaped from the threshold of her room, Jacob froze into grotesque posture beside the hearth, and I too halted in awkward stance with one foot raised in mid-air.

Behind me, Peter had ascended also, and it was he who broke the spell. "Ellen!" he said in censorious tones, and the Ellen who turned

to answer with lips curled in unwonted amusement was indeed a flesh and blood, splint and plaster Ellen Meadows who had returned, God knows how, from Van Etten Hospital.

Her explanation was clearly a mixture of lies and truth. She declared she had not only badgered Vanningham into giving his permission for her dismissal but also into taking her to Mandrake, and between the time of our departure and the arrival of the constabulary he had deposited her at the rear of the north addition. This much I credited, but her brazen avowal that during Mistress Dottie's absence she had entered the house proper by way of the kitchen door and set about removing the debris left by the constables, I knew to be a lie, for Peter had not been absent from the kitchen ell at all, and Ellen's presence in the house was clearly as startling to him as it was to all of us.

That night I went early to bed but not to sleep, since a most disturbing thought was borne into my mind. I had come upon Vanningham's motorcar at a place almost directly in line and scant distance from where Froste had stumbled over the body, and it seemed entirely possible he might possess guilty knowledge of the dead man. Perhaps Vanningham himself had killed the man in Mandrake Wood and left him there, or maybe did the man in elsewhere and bore the body to the wood on the night I had found his car in the thicket. Was the dealer who had so glibly substantiated Vanningham's tale of the Cadillac's purchase an accomplice? The whole business was akin to an enigma where one tries an object, a clue, a motive, a reason and, finding none of them fits, discards the lot and begins all over again.

Finally I slept, to be awakened almost immediately by the most eldritch shriek ever I heard in my life, followed by another and another, the sound of hasty feet and a blast of gunshot. Before I could spring from my bed a wild-eyed Benjamin catapulted through the door. Grasping his midriff he practically flung himself upon us, groaning pitifully, "I've been shot. Someone came into my room and fired at me point-blank."

I scrambled from bed, Kate after me, and one or the other of us set the room alight. Benjamin too arose from the bed and, still clasping midriff, bent forwards and executed a pseudo-Indian war dance.

"Where are you shot?" I asked, thinking Benjamin a bit agile for a man wounded unto death.

"I don't know," he said. "The shot sounded right in my ear. Something hit my shoulder. I guess it's my shoulder all right."

"Then why are you clasping your belly?"

He glared at me, but after close scrutiny revealed no bloody mark on his fair carcass, Benjamin was obliged to admit sheepishly that he'd been mistaken. "Maybe I had a nightmare," he said.

"No, you didn't," I assured him. "I heard gunshot myself. Did you hear anything, Kate?"

"Something awakened me. Of course it might have been Benjamin coming to call," she tittered.

Too many dread things had come to Mandrake House for me to accept unhappy occurrence with levity. Without waiting to don house boots or gown I flung open the door and flooded the corridor with light. A bayberry candle flickered forlornly at the table beside the settle, but Jacob and his gun were entirely missing. Oh Lord! I thought. What now? I turned to ask Benjamin if he judged the sound came from above or belowstairs, but he had retired, doubtless to array himself in more seemly fashion. Without waiting for him I dashed down the stair, Kate bearing my gown and bed boots keeping pace with me.

"Are you quite mad, Stephen?" she scolded. "You will catch your death, barefoot."

Concerned with setting the master floor alight, I made no answer. We found nothing to account for the hubbub. At the door of the north addition I beat upon the panels, wondering the while if Ellen had again been victim of attack. When at last Peter opened to me I asked, "Is anything awry, Peter?"

He blinked sleepily. "Why, nothing that I'm aware of, sir."

"Have you heard gunshot?"

"Gunshot? No indeed, sir."

"Has Ellen?"

"I fancy not, sir, but I'll inquire."

When he returned Ellen in prim gown and cap was beside him. She also avowed she had heard nothing unusual.

"Shall I accompany you, sir?" asked Peter, as, still followed by my irate wife, I turned back towards the corridor.

"I don't believe it's necessary, Peter, but hold yourself in readiness. I may need you."

Determined to search every foot of Mandrake House I again ascended. The first door I opened was the one to the Caroline suite. An icy blast from the long-closed room sent me shivering back to thrust arms into the gown Kate held for me and perishing feet into fleecy lining of bed boots.

Froste, as natty as if he had stepped from between the covers of *Esquire*, joined me. "Find anything?" he asked.

"Nothing save amounts of exceedingly cold air," I told him.

"So you suppose we had simultaneous and identical nightmares?" quipped Kate brightly.

Froste muttered something or other, but I altogether disdained to answer. As we huddled together in the mid-corridor I swear I never experienced such utter stillness as that of Mandrake House. When Kate closed our bedchamber door, it sounded like a thunderclap. Benjamin blew his nose and the very house walls seemed to quiver.

"What do we do now?" he asked, restoring handkerchief to pocket.

"Search the attic," I suggested.

"Who? Me?" he inquired in high dither.

"You and I both, Benjamin. Kate can lock herself in."

"I shall do nothing of the sort, Stephen Mandrake," declared Kate. "Whither thou goest I goest—or something like that."

Again I ignored my wife's unseemly levity. "I think it was a woman who screamed," I told no one in particular.

"There are only three females at Mandrake," Kate offered. "I'm sure I didn't scream. Ellen swears she did not. Do you suppose it's Dottie or Caroline who's carrying on?"

"I'll soon find out," I flung over my shoulder as I strode the corridor's length and opened the door into the rear stair landing. "Where's the bloody light switch?" I asked Kate. But Kate being engaged in selecting the weightiest weapon she could lay hand to, did not hear. Nor was she concerned with lack of light as Indian-fashion we ascended the stair, I in the van; Kate, armed with a poker, in centre; Benjamin trailing after.

The attic passage was also unlighted and as quiet as the dead, but from a partially closed door came a trickle of light. Towards this we advanced. When I stealthily widened the crack, I heard Kate over my shoulder exclaim, "My word!" Then apparently finding the

expletive overmild she said, "Oh, my bloody word!" But Benjamin and I stood speechless. Well we might. Before our eyes was Jacob, unconscious and pinioned beneath the weight of buxom Mistress Dottie!

"Are they dead?" quavered Froste.

I did not know but much I feared Mandrake's visitants had laid hand upon the twain before us. Living they might be ridiculous, but dead they would not be.

On lagging feet I entered and stood beside Mistress Dottie. I heard a groan, a bubbling breath. Then bulging orbs gazed into mine, and with no hesitancy at all I heaved the lass from Jacob and set about his resuscitation. Beside me Kate laboured mightily to restore Dottie to her senses. But Benjamin Froste did nothing at all save finger the cord of his elegant robe and droop open his mouth in idiotic grin. In time Jacob recovered enough to sit on Dottie's bed, rubbing a nervous hand over his poll.

"What happened?" I asked him.

"Dottie fell on me," said Jacob ruefully. "Guess I musta hit my head or somethin'. Got knocked out some way."

"I surmised that much," I told him, "but who did the shouting?"

"Dottie," answered Jacob tersely.

"Who did the shooting?"

Still more tersely Jacob said, "Me."

"Who did you shoot at and why?"

The erstwhile loquacious Jacob, however, was at the moment far from loquacity. It was Mistress Dottie who without urging began telling the tale. "I come up early," she narrated. "I wanted to find out what happened to Gwendolyn in *The Love Tragedy of Gwendolyn Duquesne*. After I had read awhile I got sleepy and turned out the light. I guess I musta dropped right off because I don't remember a thing until someone rubbed my face."

"How awful!" Kate shuddered. "Who was it?"

Dottie ignored her and got on with her tale. "First I thought I was dreamin'," she said. "So I didn't do nothin'—well, maybe I did turn over on my other side or something. But anyhow someone hit me again. I yelled."

"Yes, Dottie," I told her, "I know you yelled. But tell us what happened."

"Well, they kept a-beatin' up on me, so I yelled again good and

loud. I guess Jake musta heard me 'cause he came lickety-split up the stairs."

Jacob groaned. "I come up the stairs all right. I sure did."

To say the fellow was embarrassed would be gross understatement, but I stilled Mistress Dottie and bade him take up the tale.

"'Twas like this, boss. I heard someone yell an' grabbed up my gun. I lis'ened at your door and 'twasn't you. I lis'ened at Mr. Froste's door and 'twasn't him. Then I just lis'ened. Pretty soon I heerd some more yells and I figgered out 'twas Dottie and I come up here on the run. When I got to the door I reached in and put the light on. Somethin' with a sheet over it was in her bed. It mighta been Dottie and it might not. It looked pretty spooky, I kin tell you. I snook over an' pulled the sheet loose. It was Dottie all right. Before I gotta chance to say anything, something hit me a whack, and I let go with both barrels. Didn't rightly know what I was a-shootin' at—thought 'twas spooks."

"Wasn't it?"

"Naw," said Jacob. "Just as Dottie flung herself at me I saw what it was."

Here Dottie again set up woeful weeping. Pointing trembling finger over her shoulder she directed attention to a brace of obscene and extremely dead bats in a corner of the chamber.

"I had supposed bats hibernated," I said.

"If you mean what I think you mean, they do," answered Jacob. "I never did see bats in the winter afore."

Winter or no winter a half-score bats were holding devils' carnival in the passageway, as, bearing Mistress Dottie with us, we beat hasty retreat. What became of them I do not know. In the morning they had vanished. Had not Jacob his brace of dead bats to testify to the truth of his tale, I fear his visit to Mistress Dottie's boudoir would have taken on different complexion. However, there was an aftermath to Jacob's indoor hunting. No later than the evening of the next day, before a register's clerk, Mistress Dottie publicly avowed intention to make Jacob Schultz an honest man. Had not the idea been far-fetched I would have suspected Dottie of conniving with the powers of darkness to snare herself a husband and a legacy.

Benjamin Froste frankly could make neither head nor tail of the gigantic silhouette I had beheld, of Vanningham's odd request for

secrecy concerning his abandoned motorcar, nor of its possible significance to the dead man, and most of all he could make neither head nor tail of the dead man. Over and over he insisted that he, Benjamin, was an estates attorney, not a criminal barrister, and that he possessed no more and possibly vastly less knowledge concerning murderers than did I. All the morn we weighed and considered, but principally we argued, and before we had done Mandrake was again invaded by men of law and again its inmates were very thoroughly interrogated.

Decidedly we were considered to be of sinister character, and the absence of Helen Tempest, Rosemary York, young Stephen and the infant Sarah was thought suspicious circumstance which it would be well to explain satisfactorily. I found the constables' attitude of "Come, come now, we *know* you did the blighter in. You can't get away with it, so confess and be done with it," extremely hard to put up with, and moreover I considered our interrogators had little in common with astute heroes of cherished detective tales. In none could I trace slightest resemblance to Charlie Chan, Nero Wolfe, Inspector Cobb or that remarkable twain Holmes and Watson. Altogether I doubted their ability to seize a spool from the paws of a sportive kit, and after a brief scanning announce dramatically that murder had been done, and the body of Ferdinand MacFurskey lay at the bottom of the moat, and in no time at all cleverly reveal the dread deed was the dastardly work of Ferdinand's chum, Patrick Poposko, and so that immediately afterwards Patrick would be hanged by the neck until dead.

In time perhaps wearied with playing hunt-the-murderer the constabulary betook themselves off, but with sinister implications that they had not yet done their worst. Benjamin added nothing to my life by suggesting an excellent criminal barrister would be required to snatch Mandrake's master, mistress and minions from the dubious attention of the village turnkey. As I was myself of good conscience and reasonably certain Kate was in like spiritual condition, I had been inclined to thumb derisive nose at the law, and Froste's dismal prediction that a deal more than a clear conscience would be necessary to fend off the hangman set me trembling back on my haunches. I heartily wished persons both male and female given to having their bodies found in strange places would keep far and wide from Mandrake land. It seemed to me quite enough to live cheek by jowl

with phantoms and so on, within Mandrake House, and being forced to put up with dead bodies found lying about outside was more than could be reasonably expected of anyone. Moreover continually coming upon casual cadavers within stone's throw of the threshold seemed gloomy omen of our further life at Mandrake.

In time the law, six in number, did return but on this occasion they confined their attention to the grounds. As far as the eye might behold, the snow was turned and turned again both by hand rake and an odd mechanical contraption akin to a harrow. To this day I do not know what the constables so assiduously sought. Perhaps another dead body or two, in which case at the present moment I would have neither freedom nor wit to set down these words, for undoubtedly I would have become a screaming madman. Fortunately nothing more important than a cache of Eeny's, Meeny's and Miney's hoarded bones was brought to light, and at nightfall the frustrated constabulary with their attending gallery of curious and—if appearance counts for aught—vastly chilly persons, departed into the gloom, the law again insistently implying they had not yet done with us.

On the fourth day, with gracious legal permission, Benjamin betook himself off and almost immediately betook himself back again but, in the interval between, absence of his august person and powers gave to both Kate and me an abashed feeling of legal nakedness. For a period of three full days and nights neither phantoms nor minions of law troubled us and so serenely flowed the stream of our life Kate decided it would be well to ripple it a bit by visiting the children. But apparently the constabulary was playing cat and mouse with us, for they reached a restraining hand, in their quaint fashion said us nay, and with subtle hint of gyves and irons assured us Mandrake inmates had not yet been given a clean bill of health.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WE HAD not yet lived three-quarters of the year at Mandrake House, but in this brief time had rolled up a tidy accumulation of unexplained murders, kidnapping and mayhem. Now, added to these crimes was a stupendous bit of larceny, but this we were able to keep to ourselves and never were the constabulary of Van Etten permitted to poke their individual or collective noses into the affair.

After the departure of Benjamin, on impulse I decided to confide in Kate and related to her secrets long locked in my breast; of Peter's strange actions and of his sodden clothing on Christmas Eve; of Ellen's hectic past; of Vanningham's request for secrecy regarding his abandoned motorcar and of the sizable sum contained in his wallet. Having listened attentively until I had done, with one fell swoop Kate threw my lovely suspicions overboard, declaring Vanningham was too excellent a baby doctor to be the ill fellow I suspected him of being, and as for Ellen and Peter they were precious old dears, and I was being very silly about them, and as for Ellen's slaying of her father, she considered such matter much too unimportant to discuss. But my tale of coming upon the papers hidden in the writing table fascinated her. Slyly she began search for other hideaways, and in time brought to light evidence of the aforementioned stupendous larceny. It needed only this and a spot of arson and rape to round out neatly our circle of crime.

Somewhat to Kate's chagrin such evidence was neither hidden nor concealed, but lay altogether overlooked in a compartment of Sarah Mandrake's ornate and very empty jewel case. It was a receipt ren-

dered by the United States government for a sum paid as duty on jewels Sarah Mandrake had borne with her on entrance into the country, jewels whose value was tabulated as hundreds of thousands of dollars. I wished heartily that Kate had never come upon the cursed paper. But not so Kate. Immediately she was ringing through to Benjamin Froste, shrieking at him over the telephone as loudly as if he were thrice deafened, for to this day Kate's method of dealing with distant telephone conversation is to shout so loudly it would be quite possible for her fellow conversationalist to hear her without the aid of the instrument.

Wearily Benjamin returned, bringing with him enumeration of Mandrake's fortune—house, land and gear, plate and furnishing, and solid investments galore—but there were no jewels included in the listing of properties nor, Benjamin vowed, had he ever heard of them, and aside from governmental receipt there was no evidence such jewels had ever existed.

Literally licking his chops, Froste demanded the presence of Peter and of Ellen, and on their arrival brusquely asked, "Peter, what do you know concerning Madam Mandrake's jewels?"

"Why, a great deal, if I may say so, sir."

"Good," said Froste. "Where are they?"

"I'm sure I couldn't say, sir."

"You just said you knew about them."

"I understood you to mean description and enumeration of the jewels, sir."

"They are described well enough here," said Froste, unfolding and handing the governmental listing to Peter. "Did you ever see this paper before?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where and when?"

"Here at Mandrake, sir. Just after they were taken from the customs, I rechecked the jewels for Madam."

"But you have no idea what became of them?"

For an instant Peter hesitated. Then he said, "Not exactly, sir."

"What do you mean by 'not exactly'?"

"It was my understanding, sir, Madam gave the jewels to you for safekeeping."

Froste half rose from his chair, then restrained himself, but his voice was rough with anger as he blurted, "She did nothing of the kind!

In fact I never knew of their existence until Mr. Mandrake showed me this receipt."

Peter gave a more than brief glance at Froste. He said nothing more, and I, balancing his unruffled demeanour against Froste's poorly concealed annoyance, was hard put to decide which of the two was the more likely to be venially concerned with the missing jewels.

When Froste had regained a bit of his lost poise he turned to Ellen and said pleasantly enough, "Suppose you tell me everything you can remember about Madam's jewels."

"You'd like me to describe them, sir?"

"No, Ellen. As I told Peter, description and values are stated in this paper."

"What is it you require, sir?"

"Well, I'd like to know if it was Madam's custom to wear the jewels."

"Not since we came to the States, sir."

"None of them?"

"None of the valuable pieces, sir. She had a few token bits she kept by her—sentimental things, sir, and not especially costly."

"What became of them?"

"She was wearing them when she went away, sir."

"But you have no idea what happened to the more valuable pieces?"

Ellen looked Froste squarely in the eye. "Madam told me herself her attorney was to look after them, sir."

Benjamin shot an angry glance at the pair. There was a long silence. Then Peter, turning to me, asked, "May I inquire if there is anything further, sir?"

I glanced at Froste who shook negative head. "I believe not, Peter."

"Thank you, sir," he said. "Good night, sir. Good night, Madam."

Ellen with a dip that was second-cousin to a curtsy also bade us good night and preceded Peter from the room.

No sooner had the door closed on their triumphant backsides when Benjamin began lengthy protest of his entire innocence as to the whereabouts of the jewels. Though I permitted him to simmer in his own fat to even the score of my annoyance with him, I had no great suspicion of his guilt. Still a full quarter of a million dollars' worth of baubles might well be temptation to the staunchest of characters. For a bit we sat, each busy with his own thoughts. Then in the man-

ner of the too-ambitious soldier, Benjamin set off in all directions at once, seeking to convince me Peter was a thorough rascal, Ellen no better, Jacob a suspicious character, Vanningham not to be trusted; that the motorcar had been hidden in the thicket for midnight rendezvous with the thief and the gold which bulged Vanningham's wallet was no doubt the price to be paid when the jewels were delivered to him.

Who were we to take issue with an astute man of law? But with Kate I thought the idea of Vanningham's midnight rendezvous with the thief a bit on the stupid side, considering the thief might easily have filled his pockets with the jewels and in the broad light of day passed them to Vanningham in his own office. On the other hand, if the jewels had been stolen by one of Sarah Mandrake's household he would have doubtless known of the telltale government receipt and seen to it this also vanished.

For a full day and night we cogitated. Nostalgically I recalled the happy day when my greatest financial problem had been to find the money for quarter-day rent, the butcher and baker and candlestick-maker, and there had been no need at all to fret over vanished jewels worth more money than ever I expected to earn my life long.

The missing jewels put quite a different complexion on Mandrake's disturbance, or so said Benjamin. He was now convinced that the nefarious person who had stolen them was the one responsible for all the racket, his object undoubtedly to frighten us from Mandrake in order that he might leisurely market his wares, and while I found Benjamin's diagnosis fairly silly, I did believe that in some obscure manner the missing jewels were tied up with Mandrake's mystery.

While Benjamin began his lengthy search of banking vaults, companies of insurance and so on, Kate and I—word for word, almost letter for letter—perused a third and a fourth time every scrap of paper to which Stephen Mandrake had set pen. Perhaps the bawdy tale told by young Gamaliel Scott was a touchstone, for shortly, reading between the lines, we began to find much of Stephen Mandrake's life was sadly awry. Never did he set down unseemly comment on either his wife or her lover, but the tale Stephen unwittingly told was a sorry one indeed. It seemed that, even before the gossamer fabric of his honeymoon had been rent, his relation to his handsome wife had become one of boredom and distasteful association. It be-

came apparent also that Stephen's sister, Sarah Van Etten, bore little love for Caroline, and less than little for the saturnine Harry, that she had dwelt only briefly at Mandrake during her brother's lifetime, but at Stephen's death, when it was found he had given her lifelong use of the addition and an income which equalled that given his wife, Sarah returned prepared to do battle for her rights. At Mandrake she had remained even after Harry had removed into the bowels of Mandrake House and took to wife the relict of the dead Stephen.

After Caroline's marriage to her cousin, staid dwellers of the Hudson Valley who for long generations had been the friends of the Mandrake family kept far and wide of it, and though there was company in plenty it was such company as Mandrake had never before known, and altogether unfitting to be looked upon by the Misses Van Etten, who to their chagrin shortly found themselves inmates of a select academy for young ladies a goodish distance out of harm's way. Sarah Van Etten for long enough continued to hold the fort in the south addition, though her august presence and manifest disapproval was no check at all to the nefarious gayeties on the far side of her dwelling wall.

In time the childless Maria and Paul Van Etten sailed away to make the grand tour of Europe, taking with them Sarah's eldest daughter Fanny, a miss of twenty years, whose scant pulchritude had found no admirers in her own country; and Fanny, to her family's bewilderment and even her own, had returned to her native heath betrothed to Henry, the handsome young and wealthy Duke of Hone. And when a decorous half-year of engagement had passed, Henry, with a suite almost regal, had followed Fanny and in the great drawing room of Mandrake House took her to wife, the sanctity of such ceremony altogether unhallowed by the presence of the scandalous Harry and Caroline. The means by which Sarah Van Etten had forced the sinners to absent themselves from her daughter's nuptials she kept to herself, but whatever persuasion she used was indeed potent, for the bridal flowers had long faded when Caroline and Harry returned to Mandrake and their companioning rakehells.

In the suite of the young Duke was his kinsman Frederick Ellers who, when he returned to his native land, left his shy heart in the keeping of Betsy Van Etten. Presently Betsy followed her sister and in the magnificence of Hone House also took unto herself a husband

in the person of a staunch Britisher, to dwell happily with him in his own country, leaving behind her forever the faintly malodorous aroma of Mandrake's intrigue.

Both her daughters being well and safely wedded, Sarah again returned to do battle for Mandrake's respectability. But from the very beginning she fought a losing fight, and a full two years had not gone over her head when, turning an indignant patrician posterior to her erstwhile sister-in-law's faintly mauve shame, Sarah locked the door of the south addition behind her and sailed away to live out her life in the pomp and circumstance of her noble kinsmen by law.

Why Stephen Mandrake died weeping his bitter tears was a mystery he took with him into his grave, and why Caroline sought to erase from Mandrake trace of the Mandrake family is another mystery. Perhaps it was in anger at Stephen's subtle revenge, for Stephen had bestowed upon Caroline only the minimum amount the law insisted he bestow upon a wife, however unworthy. He had seen to it also that Caroline had the right of occupancy in the main portion of Mandrake House, during her lifetime only, and in the north and south addition had no right at all. The yearly income bequeathed to his wife was in comparison to his wealth small. Nevertheless had not Caroline wasted the major portion of it in endless alterations she might have lived very well indeed, but she was beset and driven to alter, rebuild and transform. And so it was that Mandrake's yellow bricks were changed to blazing white, the soft brown of house trim to a startling blue, and the slender oblongs of its arched windows altered into boxlike squares further distorted by slatted wooden blinds. It was by Caroline's will the huge terrace was torn from Mandrake's lawns and the stones cast down the cliff, destroying forever the ancient kilns built by the first Stephen to make brick for his house. And it was Caroline who debauched the lovely austere river façade by an ugly, obese-columned portico, wrenched the ancient iron banner of Mandrake from its gate pillars and in its stead raised a crude curved boarding bearing on its white surface the word "Riverhaven" in lettering of poisonous green.

So far she might go but no farther, for when she sought to raze both north and south additions, Stephen Mandrake reached out from his grave to say her nay. So it was that for the remainder of her days Caroline must forever endure the blankness of staunchly boarded doors and windows and their mute testimony that, living

and dead, those of Mandrake's blood still crossed her will and harassed her whims.

While we sneezed over Mandrake's dusty papers, the village of Van Etten continued to simmer over the identity of the mysterious cadaver. A full score of times the dead character was declared to be John Doe or Richard Roe, and each time Jack or Dick turned up and indignantly denied his decease. Never did I set foot in town or village but I was seized upon and presented with an avalanche of wherefore and why of possible murder. I who was seeking to delve into a slaying of a half-century before was annoyed at being forced to consider an actual slaying of the moment. Save that the corpse joined the mad company of spectres engaged with haunting Mandrake House, it held no interest for me, but regardless of this it was thrust down my throat on every possible occasion. When Dr. Glock attested the fellow's death had been caused by strangulation, and in his opinion the face had been battered after death to conceal identity, I did not care a brass farthing, but when he asserted that the approximate date of death was some thirty days prior, such statement had effect of a time bomb, for it exploded in my mind days after it had been made and brought forth two possibilities, both linking the corpse with Mandrake House and with Christmas Eve.

Aside from the household staff supposedly ten couples attended the gala, but as I recalled the number of males standing about the dancing floor it seemed to me they far exceeded the females. When I questioned Jacob he sheepishly confessed the gala had somewhat got out of hand. On Christmas Eve, to use Jacob's idiom, a half-score of rollicking blades had "crashed the gate," but he avowed all, save two, were known to him and the two whom he did not know were relatives of those he did. When I suggested the slain man might well have been among the uninvited guests, in effect Jacob cried me down, pointing out at great length the improbabilities of the suggestion. But despite his protestations, at the end of the interview I was convinced that well enough Jacob Schultz knew the identity of the corpse. I began to view Jacob somewhat with the jaundiced eye of Benjamin Froste, and then quickly thrust suspicion from me. If there remained in Mandrake House no one whom I could trust I would doubtless go quite mad.

The second possibility brought me back to Vanningham. Kate still

insisted it was he who helped her through the window and if this be true it would establish Vanningham's presence at Mandrake long after the Christmas Eve dinner party and very possibly at the hour the man met death.

Again and again I mulled the thing over until I felt like a child striving to play triple cat's-cradle all at once, and suddenly decided to leave mortal sleuthing to those better fitted to deal with it. I returned to the problem of Mandrake's ghosts, first writing at great length to Benjamin, expounding all my theories and suspicions. Benjamin, good soul that he was, replied immediately, altogether ignoring my effort at criminology, and filling the many pages of his letter with fetid bemoaning of his lack of success with finding, firstly, a banking vault held in Sarah Mandrake's name, secondly, a company who had insured Sarah Mandrake's jewels. However, he had established the fact that of her own will Madam had permitted the jewels to remain for the better part of a month with the customs, and she had made arrangement for them to be given to Peter Petralsky or to Ellen Meadows at such time as they presented proper credentials. But the record of the customs office showed the jewels had been released to neither Peter nor Ellen, but to Madam Mandrake herself. Benjamin seemed to consider the fall of France to the Nazis was for the sole purpose of frustrating his attempt to obtain information of the jewels prior to Madam's entrance into the United States. I confess that never having laid eye on Sarah's precious baubles, try as I would I could not sweat over their disappearance, nor did their tremendous worth mean anything to me. And this is understandable when one considers that never in my life had I commanded a greater sum than nine hundred pounds per annum. If I were spoken to in terms of thousands of pounds it confused me and mere contemplation of tens of thousands of pounds frightened me to death.

Washing my hands of the vanished jewels altogether, I returned gladly to metaphysical delving into this and that. In time I emerged holding a nice theory in my mental teeth, and it was not such an ill theory or one easily arrived at. Mainly it was that Stephen Mandrake having been done to death by Caroline, Harry or both, Stephen and his dogs were permitted to harry them from hell to breakfast for all eternity as punishment, and it is pitiful to consider I shall never know if such theory is meat or suet. There was no doubt Stephen's death was sudden and mysterious; that he and Caroline for long

enough had lived at dagger's point, and Harry Phillips had been involved in their quarrel; that Caroline was morally unstable and utterly without discretion; that Harry was a parasite living on Stephen's bounty, more concerned in dalliance with countless weird clocks than ever he was with the virtues of decency and gratitude.

It was understandable why such as Caroline and Harry were doomed to walk the earth, but I found myself annoyed that, regardless of his crime—if crime there were—the spirit of Stephen was not permitted to rest on the bosom of Abraham as peacefully as ever his bones rested in the Van Etten churchyard. Nevertheless Stephen and his dogs roamed Mandrake House, and Caroline also, for my eyes had borne witness to the fact, and in time they were again to bear such witness.

The twenty-sixth of January, the Feast of Blessed Polycarp, was a day which for some long-forgotten reason had always been held high holiday at Ellersly Hall, a house which made no common practice of paying honour to saints of the older church. Kate, awakening somewhat ill, had breakfast late and abed. This left me the morning long to my own devices, and at such time Jacob came bearing with him a small horsehide trunk he had found tucked away in the attic of his cottage. Mainly it contained ledgers having to do with revenue and expenditure of Mandrake land, stock books, pedigrees of swine, tabulations of seeding and harvest, and so on. The books bore dates between the year of Stephen's coming of age and that of his death. Some of the records were written by Stephen himself, others by one John McDowell, who Jacob informed me had been lands-master of Mandrake for many a long year, and who to some extent had used the stone cottage as his office.

Among the age-yellowed papers I found no word written by Stephen concerning his intimate affairs. Kate, however, had better luck.

I bade Jacob see to the cleaning of his discovery while I went to tell Kate of the treasure trove. Finding her still somewhat languid I insisted she remain abovestairs for luncheon, and bade Peter to carry mine up also. When Jacob brought the trunk we began an assortment of each year's books and papers, and so titillated did Kate become that, lest she do harm to herself, adroitly I began to chat of the day's date and our long-ago family celebrations of St. Polycarp.

Immediately interested, she started a scanning of her Book of

Common Prayer to see what she could turn up concerning the good Polycarp. Beyond the fact he was a disciple of John, very possibly John the Apostle, the prayer-book had nothing to say of him, but the epistle of the day was hair-raising. It dealt at length with the slaying of Abel and other grisly aspects of the crime of murder, and God knows such epistle was vastly fitting to Mandrake House, for Mandrake and murder methinks went hand in hand.

In time Peter removed the debris of our luncheon. Kate insisted on returning to perusal of John McDowell's papers and excitedly turned up a half-dozen letters written McDowell during Stephen Mandrake's absence from home. Each contained reference and inquiry to an unnamed girl, apparently well known to both Stephen and his landsmaster. Kate's excitement mounted to high pitch. When she came upon several letters mucilaged together by time she literally screamed at me to assist in rendering them apart. But before I could reach out a hand to take them, seemingly the letters were snatched from her, and I solemnly swear from that day to this neither of us or anyone in Mandrake House ever laid eye on them.

As we sat with foolishly extended hands, gap-mouthed and staring, the table on which books and papers had been assorted leaped from the floor and overturned with unholy crash and Kate, shielding her head with her arms, set up screaming at the top of her voice. My concern with her was leavened with astonishment, for hitherto Kate had been of calm and staunch character. She continued to scream. Putting my arms about her, I endeavoured to draw her from the jumble of books and table, and as God is my judge I avow someone or something began showering me with blows. Utter panic descended. Only confusedly did I hear Peter's furious feet pounding the stair, but no sooner did he enter the room when the blows ceased. Wit returned, and I was able to assist in getting Kate into her bed.

My panacea for personal ills is a hefty tot of brandy, but I retained enough reason to remember stimulants and hysteria are a poor mixture and asked Peter if he knew a soothing draught. Of course he did; immediately fetching it he held it to Kate's lips. To my astonishment tears washed his cheeks, and certainly the effect of Peter's tears should have been different, for all they brought to mind was a chancy tale of Jack the Ripper, or some such fellow, who thought nothing at all of cutting a throat but was wont to go sad and sorry at misfortunes of stray grimalkins. Not that I was as yet convinced Peter was

a murderer, or that Kate was in any manner akin to beset felines.

When Kate had at last done with her screaming, she lay in such mute, exhausted misery that, though I was reluctant to have the chap about, I bade Peter ring through to Vanningham. As before the doctor found nothing physically amiss and there was nothing he might do for her save administer sedatives. In due time Kate slept. Leaving Jacob on guard, I descended with Vanningham, groping for words to tell what had happened, and as had so often been my predicament since coming to Mandrake I found no words which were adequate.

When we were settled over glasses beside the library fire, Vanningham said, "Would it make you feel any better to spill it, Steve?"

"Spill it?" I repeated. "What in the world do you mean?"

"Oh hell, Steve! Quit beating around the bush."

"I'm not beating around the bush, as you call it, and I can't spill anything because I don't in the least know what happened."

"You were with Kate all day, weren't you?"

"Rather so, but I still haven't the faintest notion what sent her off at a tangent."

For a long moment the doctor peered so intently at me I contemplated a spot of hysteria myself, one which would by comparison make Kate's attack very small tubers indeed.

As I brooded over a proper method to begin, Vanningham said, "I would judge Kate to be an unusually healthy female. Certainly I have never found much wrong with her and there isn't, as far as I can see, a damn reason in the world for her blowing her top unless someone is working hard to make her blow it."

"What do you mean?"

"There's skulduggery going on around here, Steve, and while you are an apparently devoted husband . . ."

He left the sentence hanging in mid-air as I sat gasping and then, more wrathful than ever I'd been in my life, "Are you implying I'm harming my wife?" I shouted.

"Keep your shirt on, Steve. Howling does not impress me. I'm not implying anything. That's not the way I do business. But I think maybe I'll get out a circular letter reading something like this: 'Dear Sir or Madam: This is to warn you anyone who put the finger on Kate Mandrake will have 250 pounds of mad guy to lick. No foolin'.' I'll sign it 'Barry Vanningham' and mail a couple of copies to folks around here."

He arose, took his shabby medicine case from the table and lumbered towards the door, turning at the threshold to say, "No hard feelings, Steve, I hope. I'm just a roughneck, you know, no manners or anything. That's a pretty swell gal you've tied up with, fella, and my advice is not to let anything happen to her." Then he added as an afterthought, "You're not married to this place, are you? Why don't you get the hell out before something you'll be sorry for happens?"

The door closed behind him and I heard the roar of a starting motor. "The bloody beggar," I told myself, "does he think me dolt enough not to smell the red herring he's drawing across the trail?"

I began to think there was a germ of reason in Froste. Maybe Vanningham *did* have reason to wish us wide of Mandrake. Certainly no matter how one regarded Vanningham, one found puzzling conditions in the fellow. Fancy him accusing *me* of being a deep-dyed villain when long ago I cast him for such role! Inwardly fussing and fuming I went again to Kate and had my second shock that day, for Kate, who had hitherto blithely refused to leave Mandrake, now pleaded to be gone from it, and strangely I, who often enough had toyed with the idea, vowed mutely that neither spectre nor mortal man would drive me from the house Sarah Mandrake had entrusted to my keeping. But I determined to take Kate to the children and only when Mandrake could provide untroubled existence would I permit my family to return.

On the morning after our alarm, without seeking the law's permission, we set out for New York. On this occasion, despite Kate's protests, I tarried only for such time as was necessary to listen to Froste's fairly boring description of his search for the missing jewels, relate to him the necessity for Kate's sudden flight, and visit all too briefly with young Stephen and my charming daughter Sarah.

Directly I was returned to Mandrake House I determined to thresh matters out with Peter, and perhaps with Ellen. I summoned Peter to the library, telling him abruptly I did not credit one iota of the tale he had told of Christmas Eve, and assuring him if he could not satisfactorily explain both his absence and the condition of his clothing I would daily no longer with the fantastic business, but, closing the house, would go elsewhere to live.

When I had done I swear never was distress so clearly depicted on human countenance, and the thought came to me that if Peter

Petralsky had stolen the jewels he was paying a price far beyond their worth. It came to me also that when next I held interview with a chancy character I'd see to it a bludgeon, or mayhap Jacob Schultz, was near to hand. At that moment save Ellen there was none but our two selves in Mandrake House, and I had no expectation Ellen would strike against her liege lord on my behalf.

So long did Peter keep silence I became apprehensive lest he was about to make my poor carcass the third found lying about. But in time, when he'd gathered words together, the chap spun me a yarn unreasonable, incredible and as fantastic as the very devil, yet one I found myself accepting as gospel.

"I'm sorry you do not credit what I've told you, sir," he began. "I do assure you I'm speaking the truth when I say I was in Mandrake cellars on the night in question."

"What led you to expect Ellen to hide in the cellars?" I asked.

"Well, you see, sir, she hid there on another occasion."

"What other occasion?"

"It's a long story, sir."

"Time, Peter," I told him, "is a commodity with which I am very well supplied."

"It goes back quite some time, sir, back to the day we first came to Mandrake. The inn at Van Etten is what one might call a bit crude, sir, and when I found the south addition possessed a proper kitchen I suggested to Madam if that portion was put in order she would doubtless be more comfortable there than at the inn. It is, as perhaps you know, sir, really quite a charming maisonette, and at first Madam was happy there, but after a time she seemed obsessed with the notion of going to live immediately in the house proper and had the person in charge of the rehabilitation of the estate concentrate workmen in an effort to render it livable. Even before the servants' quarters in the attic had been completed, or repairs to the north addition were begun, Madam insisted on removing into Mandrake House, and we did so. With the servants' quarters uncompleted, it was quite impossible to maintain a proper staff, so Ellen and I looked after housekeeping matters as best we could. Madam left sleeping arrangements to us, and I chose the bedchamber which later young Mr. Stephen occupied, while Ellen went to sleep in the chamber beside Madam's.

"On the day we took occupancy of the house proper I served

Madam her luncheon in the south addition, and inquired if she would have dinner served there or in the Mandrake dining room. She replied, 'In the dining room,' and expressed a wish the table be laid with certain linen and silver, and stated that she expected a guest. After luncheon I went immediately into the house and set about attending to various matters.

"I do not know what time Madam arrived in Mandrake House, but about four she rang for tea in the drawing room and I served her there. As I left the room I heard Madam say, 'Stephen!' in a rather breathless fashion, but when I glanced about I saw no one present and I must say, sir, I was somewhat troubled. I mentioned the matter to Ellen when we were at our own tea. Ellen said elderly people often took fancies and it was better not to take notice. Later Madam rang for me and requested me to procure a certain sort of red roses for the table, and I rang through to the floral shop at Van Etten and had them rushed special. I thought this was a bit odd because I'd never known Madam to concern herself with details of the housekeeping. She was passionately fond of flowers, sir, but in all the years I served her, she'd left their selection and arrangement to me.

"Eight o'clock was Madam's usual hour of dining, and just prior to that I went to inquire if cocktails would be served, but Madam said wine would suffice and bespoke a certain sherry I'd fortunately been able to lay down, a dry wine *blanc*, and brandy served in the drawing room with the coffee.

"At eight I announced dinner. There was no one in the drawing room save Madam, and when she entered the dining room alone I tell you, sir, I'd begun to feel queer, as she'd made no mention whether her guest had been delayed, or in fact anything further regarding a guest. I seated Madam, went to the pantry for the soup course, and when I returned I'll give you my solemn word, sir, there was a gentleman sitting opposite to Madam at the table."

"What sort of a gentleman, Peter?"

"I've seen him many times since, sir. A tall gentleman in rather outmoded formal clothing."

"Did Madam converse with him, Peter?"

"No, sir, but she called attention to my not serving the second place with soup and so I served the remainder of dinner precisely as if Madam was entertaining a guest.

"Madam's illness had caused her to be somewhat nervous, sir, and

she liked me to serve her directly, so I always placed the food on her plate. Not quite formal, sir, of course, but in Madam's case necessary, if you'll forgive my mentioning it, sir."

"It's quite all right, Peter. What happened then?"

"As I remember we had a clear soup, a bit of sole and breast of fowl, with a salad that Madam had particular fancy for, and I served the second place as I served Madam, sir. Of course the food remained untouched, the sherry also, but when I served the wine I'll give you my word, sir, when Madam lifted her glass as in a toast, I saw the second glass lift from the table and remain suspended in mid-air until Madam had finished drinking. It gave me a bad turn, sir, and I spoke to Ellen of the matter. She made excuse to go in to Madam, and I quite remember she cried me down for a fool, if I may say such thing, sir."

"What occurred after that, Peter?"

"Nothing just then, sir. I served Madam coffee and liqueur in the drawing room, sir, and I was careful to bring service for two without being so instructed. And then Madam made music for a time, and before I'd done the locking up, sir, she rang for Ellen and went abovestairs with her. Then I also ascended and retired."

"Did I understand you to say there was a second unusual occurrence that night, Peter?"

"Strictly speaking, it was the morning following, sir. About dawn I was awakened by my bed swaying quite violently. I thought a storm had blown up and arose to latch my windows. It was light enough for me to see there was not a leaf stirring on the trees, and I was most perplexed, sir. Then I realized not only my bed was swaying about, but the house also was in motion, and as there was a peculiar humming sound I became apprehensive lest the electrical plant had gone awry. I slipped on trousers and jacket with the notion of descending to the motor cellar and, thinking Ellen might also have been aroused and alarmed, tapped at her door to reassure her. Knowing Ellen to be easily awakened, when she did not answer I was somewhat puzzled and thrust the door on crack. Ellen was not in her bed, sir, and I immediately crossed over her bedchamber to the smaller passage and opened the door into Madam's chamber, and I do assure you, sir, the sight almost left my eyes!"

I said nothing and he continued: "Madam was unconscious on the bed, sir, Ellen crouching over her, while a huge beam swung just

above the bed, suspended from the ceiling. I'm afraid, sir, for a moment I went off witless, and then I somehow got across the bed-chamber, thrust Ellen aside, drew Madam from the bed and managed to get her underneath the framing. I urged Ellen to creep in beside her, and looked about for a safe place for myself, sir, being much too bulky to share the space with Madam and Ellen, sir."

"Did you hit on a place, Peter?"

"It wasn't what one might call safe, sir, but at the moment the best that could be managed. As you know the window recesses are of considerable depth, sir, and I backed into one and stood quite terror-stricken peering at the monstrous bit of wood teetering back and forth no end."

For a moment Peter paused and wiped his brow. "Its most disturbing to remember even now, sir," he said.

"I'm sure it is. What happened then?"

"It really appeared as if persons were struggling with the thing, sir. After a bit it was flung the chamber's width, crashed through the closed door and fell into the corridor. This much of the tale can be verified, sir, by workmen who repaired the door, the flooring of the corridor, and replaced the ceiling beam. It required a score of chaps, as well as a mechanical device to manage it, sir, I do assure you."

"Did Madam Mandrake continue to occupy the chamber?"

"Oh, yes, sir, the beams were thoroughly looked into and I believe strengthened. They gave no more trouble as far as I know."

"What did Madam Mandrake have to say of the occurrence?"

"She never mentioned it, neither to me nor to Ellen, sir."

"Was this the occasion Ellen hid in the cellar?"

"Yes, sir. Between us we bore Madam into the Sarah chamber. I knew what was required to do for Madam and I did it, sir. Then I sent Ellen to her bed while I stayed to attend Madam. I remained until full daylight, but when I went to rouse Ellen to prepare breakfast she was not in her bed. I supposed she'd already descended, but shortly I found she wasn't in the kitchen either, and I do assure you, sir, I was quite frantic until I came upon her sitting in the cellars, weeping. She seemed to have no notion why she'd got there, but after she'd had her tea she was quite all right. So you see, sir, when she was missing on the eve of Christmas, I fancied she'd been frightened again, and again had hidden herself in the cellars."

"Where do you suppose she was that night, Peter? Did Ellen ever tell you what really happened to her?"

"Ellen is rather of secretive character, sir, as perhaps you know," answered Peter obtusely. "She vows she knows nothing more than she has told."

"That's as may be, Peter. But I asked what was your theory."

"I think it was very possible she was on the bed for quite some time, sir, and being unconscious she was unable to make her whereabouts known."

"Balderdash, Peter! I was in and out of the Caroline suite a dozen times, and I'll swear Ellen was not on that bed until daylight or shortly before."

"You don't think, sir, the covers were a bit tossed about and concealed her?"

"As a matter of fact, the covers were not tossed about. On Christmas Eve Mrs. Mandrake had excused the maids from night-servicing the bedchambers, therefore the beds had been left as they were."

"It's most mysterious, sir."

"Not to you, Peter."

"May I inquire what is meant, sir?"

"Peter, there is something awry in Mandrake House. What it is I do not even pretend to understand, but it is my firm conviction that you, and perhaps Ellen as well, know a great deal more than you pretend to know, but mark my words, someday I'm going to get at the bottom of this chancy business."

"I'm sorry you think ill of us, sir."

"You are not sorry, Peter. Otherwise you would assist instead of hindering me."

For the length of a drawn breath Peter hesitated, then the blank curtain again lowered over his eyes and the things evidently trembling on his lips were not put into words. Instead, he began strange recital of flower vases moving through space of their own volition, of doors shutting and opening with no human hands upon them, and of Sarah Gresham's ancient harpsichord playing softly by itself.

When he had done I asked a canny question. "Do you think it would be wise for me to leave Mandrake altogether, Peter?"

"Oh, no, sir," said Peter fervently. "I am quite sure, sir, if we persevere these troubling matters will cease."

Vanningham advised me to flee Mandrake, Peter to remain. What price your theory of an entente between them, Benjamin?

Nevertheless that night when Peter ceased his chat and asked my permission to withdraw the very marrow was frozen in my veins. I bespoke a double whiskey and bade him, at whatever price he must pay, see to it our bins were constantly replenished, for I had dire portent in time to come I would know vast need of such.

Recanting determination to wrestle mentally with Ellen, I approached the third person who, prior to our coming, had dwelt at Mandrake House. When my chat with Jacob Schultz was done, I had acquired knowledge concerning everything but that which I had set out to acquire. For all his evasions I was more than ever convinced Jacob, if he knew nothing of Mandrake's spectres, did know something of the dead man, and very possibly of the dead woman also. I had acquired tidy amounts of fact, conjecture, legend and surmise. But I needed a great deal more, and suddenly decided to turn the light of a disinterested intelligence on Mandrake's mystery. To that end I rang through to Vicar Wilroy, asking that he share my bachelor existence for a night. Dispensing with Jacob's service, I drove the span of cobs on the evening following to fetch my guest to Mandrake. I found him well bundled, pacing before his church, his eyes turned to the handsome heavens overhead, and with the man of God beside me I turned home again under light of stars gleaming from behind shifting clouds and a low-hanging gibbous moon.

The night was brittle with cold, the ride chill enough and the lighted windows of Mandrake welcome indeed. It seemed entirely incredible that the peaceful ancient house harboured either spectral or mortal ill will. I think Vicar Wilroy has fancied himself as the blunt, lusty, hell-for-leather parson so prevalent in British fiction—and so utterly lacking in British clerical life—for as we sat at table in unvarnished phrasing he began recital of many things of which I would have been as happy to remain in ignorance.

Without encouragement he avowed the vicinity of Mandrake had long been notorious for the number of violent deaths which had occurred over a period of years. Aside from the still unidentified bodies recently come upon, he named seven persons who had ceased living in suspect circumstance. I was vaguely wondering if it was the restless wraiths of the lot who had set up headquarters at Mandrake House, when I became conscious the Vicar was speaking of Harry

and Caroline. Then I gave him my avid attention, and learned that in later years the somewhat sinister pair had lived in seclusion, their only contact with the outer world the weekly coming of the grocer's cart. It was to the driver of such cart the half-crazed Caroline poured out the tale of Harry's disappearance, and though Van Etten had practically turned out en masse to search for him, neither hide nor hair of the missing Harry was come upon, and the river froze and thawed again before the remains of his body were found bedded in the slimy shallows of the river.

I thought revelation of Harry's terrible death might well be a missing bit of the Mandrake puzzle, and I was grateful for it, but perhaps not so grateful to learn Jacob Schultz's mother had been one of the seven to die in suspect circumstance, that his twin sister had altogether vanished and his father, suspected of killing her, had lived for long shackled to the walls of his cell and at last had died in the county madhouse. Poor Jacob Schultz! I did not envy him his memories.

By the time we had done with dinner the long-gathering storm broke in an unholy oratorio about the eaves, and I bade Peter to fetch the brandy bottle with our coffee to the library. I well know it was his copious swigs which loosed the Vicar's tongue, for in the hours which followed I learned from him a monstrous amount of Mandrake, the farms adjoining, the people living upon them, which I would not have learned in his soberer senses.

The corridor clock was striking three before the parson's chatter was done, and as I hooded the fire I became conscious the vibrations we had experienced on Christmas Eve again wailed throughout the house. I peered at Wilroy, but he was too somnolent to sense anything was awry, and I thought we would do well to ascend as quickly as might be. Drawing the somewhat unsteady Vicar with me I crossed towards the stair, but we had not mounted a dozen steps when again I heard faintly the snarling of unseen dogs, and beheld wispy shreds of vapour floating towards us down the stair. Uncertain and puzzled, Wilroy turned towards me and asked facetiously if I thought him tipsy. I decided it was no time to discuss the matter and, slipping my arm beneath his shoulder, began hasty ascent.

We had reached the place in the stair from which the mid-corridor is visible when Wilroy halted and, clinging to the banister and turning dazed eyes upwards, murmured, "Stephen, Stephen Mandrake, in

God's holy name——" His voice faltered. Slowly he fell forwards and slipped the stair's length downwards and, striking my uncertain limb from under me, bore me with him on his back comically as if I rode a toboggan. Even in my terror I wanted to guffaw, for no doubt we appeared akin to pranking schoolboys.

At last when I had rolled off the man, he scrambled on all fours like an awkward puppy until he collapsed spraddle-legged against the newel post. Then I did guffaw, but I fear there was more of hysteria than mirth in my laughter.

By the time I had righted myself and assisted Wilroy to his feet, he was as solemn as a wigged justice. When I drew him with me to the library and hastily told him of Mandrake's ghostly visitants the hearty sporting parson vanished before my eyes, and it was a sober man of God who, drawing the ministerial cross from his waistcoat, said quietly, "I'm going up that stair, Mandrake," and holding the tiny symbol of Christ before him step by step he slowly ascended.

He went alone. A man may endure so much and beyond that he may not go. I had come to the end of my tether and had my very life depended upon such act I could neither ascend nor stay to behold another go towards some damned and unholy thing. Cowardlike I fled towards the door of the north addition and beat upon it, calling to Peter, and then came again into the corridor to find Wilroy lying senseless at the bottom of the stair, a sickening pallor drenching his ruddy cheeks.

Within my time at Mandrake two persons had dreadfully died just outside its walls. I wanted no third and dreadful death within. Though the act was truly beyond my strength I laid hold of the unconscious parson and dragged him after me until I found Peter beside me, and for that moment at least I welcomed him. Together we stretched Wilroy on the drugget before the library hearth and wrapped his shivering body in a blanket.

While Peter sought to force brandy between his clenched teeth, I raised the bottle to my mouth and swilled a great draught, and the fiery liquid racing down my gullet brought enough courage to keep me from rushing shouting and maniacal into the night. Around us the walls trembled mightily, their vibrations like to the echo of a quivering brazen gong. The floor beneath our feet trembled also, and the room's furnishings and the portraits of Mandrake men high on the wall.

Beneath his blankets Wilroy's body shook like an aspen leaf.

Slowly consciousness returned to him and because I must, without pity for him, I sought to find why he had called out Stephen Mandrake's name. He vowed he had known the form standing at the stairhead to be that of the fourth Stephen, though he had been dead and in his grave before ever Wilroy was born.

Above in the mid-corridor the sound and fury intensified until it seemed more than mortal man might endure. Again and again I beheld Peter wipe the sweat from his face, but God knows I had need of no such thing, for the gale-driven snow swirling about Mandrake House was no colder than I was and I felt that never as long as I lived would I again be warm. Peter's blanched lips murmured something about Ellen but what he said of her I did not understand. "What is it, Peter?" I asked him. "What did you say?"

"May I see if Ellen is quite all right, sir?"

"Good God, man, why ask permission for such thing?" I barked. "Of course, see if she is all right." Then in almost abject terror I watched him vanish into the north addition, leaving me alone to deal with the dithering parson and apparently numbers of spectres.

"Have you a Bible?" Wilroy whispered.

"Scores of them," I answered, but when I sought to remember where a single one was I could not. I could not even recall if Kate had taken her prayer-book with her or if it lay in its usual place on her bedside table. As I sent my mind meandering into every conceivable place a Bible might be found, Peter, seemingly relieved and tranquil, came again into the hall-corridor and for a little we three stood silent wondering what next to do. But shortly the parson dropped to his knees and covering his face with trembling hands began audible prayer, then arose and strode into the corridor and towards the stair, while I, frantically bellowing, shouted to Peter to lay hand upon him and hold him below.

Slowly the lights dimmed, thick, sooty darkness enveloped us, and my very marrow sensed the nameless thing coming down the stair towards where we stood together. Had I the strength to draw bolt I swear that night I would have fled the cursed house forever, but try as I would I could not move and stood with arms flung backwards across the door, clinging to the solid wood to keep upon my feet, while the Vicar tore the cross from its chain, and raising it high sternly bade evil spirits to return to their familiar hell, and those of good intent to speak their need.

In swirling of loathsome vapour I beheld the pale wraith of Caro-

line Phillips, snarling lips stripped over her gleaming pointed teeth, and at her feet a loathsome quivering thing too dreadful for man to behold and keep sane sense—and Stephen with his dogs stood sternly on guard behind them.


Slowly as they had begun, the whining vibrations ceased, the house came alight and Caroline had vanished, but the phantom Stephen, dim and indistinct, turned and went slowly up the stair.

Dawn comes late in winter and there were many hours of darkness still to be lived through, but nothing on earth could induce Wilroy to ascend and sleep decently in a bed. So I bade Peter brew coffee and replenish the fire, and coaxed the parson to lie on the chesterfield drawn to the hearth. All resemblance to mundane minister had fled; the man was sure that night he had beheld the hounds of hell, and mayhap the devil himself. He vowed it was the wont of Satan to assume bewildering forms and so confuse mankind, and the thing beside the snarling Caroline was no doubt her devilish master.

As a priest of God Wilroy warned me be done with Mandrake House before harm came to me, and when day broke besought me to send him home. Nor could I prevail on him to remain for such time as was needful to breakfast, and with no more than coffee in his belly he went forth, and I, beholding Jacob's sleigh bear him through the drifts in Mandrake Lane, well knew within the walls of Mandrake House I had seen the very last of Vicar Wilroy.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

FTEN Kate had twitted me regarding my reluctance towards formal and public worship of God, for I cherished vast repulsion to sitting for hours on end in the company of persons I did not know at all, and very possibly would not like if I did, while I listened to discourse on various aspects of Christianity which altogether confused me. But having been somewhat responsible for Wilroy's sorry experience at Mandrake, I made up my mind the very least I could do would be to sit under his pulpit for a sermon or two, and so on the Sunday following his visit I set out for Van Etten and the Church of the Messiah.

I was on the late side and entered as the Psalm was read. It seemed as if it had been specially selected for me, for it asks plaintively of the Divinity, "Why hast thou put me from thee? why go I so heavily, while the enemy oppresseth me?" and a bit farther along hopefully beseeches: "O send out thy light and thy truth." I'll wager a bright sovereign no man in the congregation repeated the blessed words with more fervour than I did, for any light and truth the good God might think fit to bestow upon Mandrake and its problems would be vastly welcome, nor could I think of one whom the enemy oppressed with greater industry than my poor self.

I was quite convinced the service was altogether for my benefit until the sermon began and I found it had to do with the Saint to whom the day was dedicated, "Saint Martina the Virgin." I rather lost touch with the discourse as I sat wondering if holy women of ancient times were not a bit put about at being publicly dubbed "Virgin," and if it would not have been in better taste to take their virginity for granted, and say no more of it, or mayhap it was that

virgins were so exceedingly rare that when one was come upon the populace made a great to-do, and the title "Virgin" was bestowed something in the fashion of knighting a commoner.

Before I had done with my cogitating the final hymn was under way and I stealthily betook myself off, since I was not in the mood for the interrogation which was almost visible in the eyes of my fellow worshippers. But regardless of late arrival and early departure, I drove the span home very conscious of a spot of righteousness blooming beneath my waistcoat, convinced I was a deal better man than he who lay abed, or warmly beside his hearth, entangled among voluminous pages of newsprint.

That even Jacob Schultz waited upon me requesting my august approval to wedding Mistress Dottie, and I wondered if it was Jacob's intent to abandon his nightly perch beside my door or if he would bring his bride to lie coyly on the opposite settle. For whatever it was worth I gave consent, and Jacob betook himself off without mentioning the date of his intended nuptials.

For a full fortnight Mandrake continued as free of turmoil as if never ghost or goblin had troubled it, and almost I was convinced they had made final appearance on the night of the Vicar's visit. Then on the sixth day of February, apropos of nothing at all, in broad daylight I opened the door into the Caroline suite and as God is my judge the painted woman had entirely fled from the portrait frame. No hand clasped the long handle of the parasol, no smiling eyes coquetted from beneath its ruffles, and without the circling arm about him the foolish little dog sat forlorn and lonely on its pedestal. For a moment only I remained gap-mouthed and staring, and then abruptly closing the door between me and the dreadful thing stood in the corridor fingering everything in my pockets, naming them aloud in valiant effort to convince myself I was of sane and stable mind.

"Key-ring," I chanted idiotically, "knife, lucky sovereign, change purse, billfold." Having exhausted my pockets' contents I set to murmuring nursery rhymes. "Turn again, Whittington, thrice Lord Mayor of London town," I drooled, and "Sing a song of sixpence, a pocket full of rye." The last selection was fortunate, for it gave me sound idea, and very shortly indeed if my pockets were not filled with rye, my belly had full component of excellent Scotch. Thereafter I ascended the stair and with no nonsense about it flung open

the door of the suite. Caroline was still missing. I didn't believe a bit of it but there it was, the edges of the canvas standing out stiffly but no Caroline at all visible.

I toyed with the idea of emulating the Apostle Thomas and thrusting my hand into the open space, but not for the wealth of the Indies would I have stepped foot over the threshold, and at last, closing the door, I turned the key in the lock and left Caroline to her mischief.

That night, for the first time in my life, I became deliberately drunken. I write "deliberately" because hitherto my bouts with Bacchus had been unpremeditated, but returning for a third peep at the portrait the sight of the lonely little dog was more than could be borne, and I went back to my bottle and shortly indeed had phantoms and so on come a-visiting I would have poured them libations and invited them to join me in a chorus. To this day when I behold certain glints in the eyes of Peter and of Jacob Schultz, I sheepishly recall my frightful rendering of ballads having to do with tears, sorrowful hearts and bereft maidens, and I believe I also sang at great length of winding sheets, lonely graves and mouldering corpses. And well enough I remember standing with arms clasped about Peter and Jacob while we harmonized off key on roundelays not usually sung in polite society, for I had insisted both gentlemen share my dalliance with the grape.

If on that night any mortal had wished ill to me, without hindrance from me they could have cut my throat, and I, no doubt thinking it a great lark, would have merrily given assistance in sharpening the knife.

At dawn I awakened with a monstrous aching head to behold Peter sprawled in a chair, his feet on another, retaining a good deal of dignity even in his drunken sleep, while before the blazing hearth Jacob Schultz snored on the drugget. Undoubtedly replenishing fires was so much part and parcel of the man's existence he had unwittingly piled it with fuel even as he snored. Greatly I would have liked to guffaw, but fearful lest such antic blow the top from my head, I lay down again and lapsed into sleep. I was awakened by Ellen bearing in her sound hand what I have since learned to call "hair of the dog," whiskey, Bromo-Seltzer, and a cup of hot black coffee, and so patently was disapproval written on Ellen's face one might have scraped it off with a knife. Chop-fallen I accepted her ministrations, but a certain grim something about her hindered me

from inquiring how fared Peter Petralsky. As for Jacob, such inquiry was not needful. Above my head I heard him dot-and-carrying as briskly as if he had not made a night of it.

Bacchanal nights, however, were no answer to Mandrake's problems either mortal or spectral, and my head had not done with aching when the all too familiar constabulary again knuckled our door and threw me into a high dither lest another defunct person had come to light in my immediate vicinity. I wondered if perhaps I were not a dread sort of magnet which attracted dead bodies.

It was not a dead body but a living one which brought the law again to Mandrake, for they proposed to take into custody the person of one Donald Clifton for the purpose of interrogating him as to what he knew of the man found dead in Mandrake Wood. To my knowledge there was no such person employed at Mandrake, and I said so, but it came to light a chap whom I hitherto had known as "Butch" was one and the same person as Donald Clifton, and it seemed to me no man in sane sense would write down as criminal the cheerful fellow on the smallish side whose grin was as much part of his face as his nose. Nevertheless the law looked upon him with suspicious eye and, in spite of the fact he had told all he knew at the coroner's inquest, demanded he return to the office of the chief constable and tell it all over again.

Butch himself was quite set up with the furor he was creating, and tarrying only long enough to change work clothing for his "good soot" he rode happily away with all the zest of a small boy setting out for a treat, and from the official sleigh flung reassurance to me, bidding me, "Now don't you git to worriting, boss. Hell! I ain't killed nobody, you oughta know that."

Of course I knew it and Butch also knew it, but like the story of the Dutchman's dog, did the law know it? Again I summoned Froste to Mandrake. To his vast disgust he found the to-do had been made for no greater reason than the fact Clifton had been seen now and again loitering in the vicinity of the spot where Froste had stumbled over the body, and a knife identified as belonging to him had been found in the dead man's pockets. Of course he could not be held on such flimsy pretence and within twenty-four hours he was again at Mandrake, and Froste on his disgruntled way to New York, seemingly having no desire at all to linger under Mandrake roof.

Regardless of Butch's being restored to pristine state of honour

the constabulary continued to harry us, popping up at unexpected moments and flinging supposedly adroit questions at our heads. They had not taken kindly to Kate's unwarranted flitting and were inclined to make much of it.

But bothersome as were my mortal ills, my phantasmagorical woes troubled me still more and I firmly made up my mind to shilly-shally no longer. In the manner of the chaps who go about with vats of noxious fluid strapped to their back for the purpose of exterminating insects, would I equip myself with a vast amount of knowledge and set about the mass extermination of Mandrake's spectres. Though at this moment I may write facetiously of the dreadful months I endured, there was nothing at all comical about them. More than once I was tempted to go forth forever and well as might be earn daily bread and enjoy daily peace elsewhere. But I am of stubborn character, and furthermore I was certain there must be some way in which the unholy dead might be flayed back to their unholy graves. The Old World's almost forgotten practice of exorcism was to be considered, but knowing little of it I decided to fare farther afield than the library of Van Etten for information.

That night, with the law's surly permission, I slept soundly beside my wife. Another night I slept there also and spent lovely wholesome hours with young Stephen and Miss Sarah. But as greatly as I needed the company of my family, I needed more to make their home safe for them, and to this end in the huge library guarded by its stony inane lions, I browsed through ancient lore until at least the externals of exorcism were known to me. Externals did not satisfy, and so it was I sought out a priest of the Exorcist Order of the Roman Church, and to such man told the tale of Mandrake's evil. I beheld the priest's blanched hands clutch the arms of his chair and heard his murmured supplication, "From spirits of evil, O Lord, deliver thy servants." Sternly I was warned such practice must not be lightly solicited, for those who have power to cast out devils pay heavy spiritual cost, and I gave solemn promise I would enter into such thing only if the need be urgent and all other methods of warfare against the unhallowed dead failed.

That night I sat late with Froste telling what I had done, what I planned to do. He gave me his word he also would strive and contrive to heal the ancient house of its ills. Apprehensively enough I again returned to Mandrake and found Mandrake wholly at peace, and

then it was borne upon me that perhaps I myself was the nucleus of its unease.

From that night forwards Mandrake House was virtually in state of siege against the powers of darkness. On February eleventh came the final and most severe snowstorm of the season. Beginning at midday without wind or bluster snow fell steadily for all of the afternoon and evening, but before dawn a terrific gale began howling about the eaves like a million angry fiends. Well towards dawn I awakened, to lie shivering among the covers, thinking Mandrake's unholy trembling had again begun, and if I appear cowardly I would have those who read what I have written remember my unstable state of health when I first came to Mandrake, and I assure them long months of striving against unseen forces had done nothing to improve it.

The room was cold, the fire low on the hearth, and I arose and set about its replenishing. Then I walked about, doing the trivial acts common to those bereft of sleep. Suddenly I knew I was not alone in the bedchamber. No longer did Jacob perch beside my door at night, but lay with his love in the corner chamber that had been young Stephen's, and at that moment the corner chamber seemed as far removed as the water of the Atlantic Ocean. Scarce drawing breath, I waited while lights flickered, the room was shrouded in vague mist, the suffering house whined and trembled. At the hearthside I fumbled for a candle, thrust it into the fire and tremblingly held it aloft to behold Caroline Phillips peering at me from the threshold.

Clear and distinct as a living woman might stand, she smiled above the laces covering the rosy nipples of her breast, and I saw plainly tinted flesh under the webbing of her gown, ruddy hair agleam with firelight, tender pleading eyes, a sensual mouth. When the slender arms reached towards me I could not flee, did not want to flee, and bewitched would have traded my very hope of heaven to crush the lovely flesh against my own, traded immortal soul to taste the lush red mouth, and even if I must return with it to hell, to make the wraith my own.

Conscience nudged me, or perhaps it was the molten wax dripping down my hand that freed me from the cursed spell. In a voice so shrill never would I have thought it my own, I bade the spectre be gone, and Caroline smiled no more but curled her snarling lips

against her teeth, the soft hands curved into bestial claws ready to do me ill. I could endure it no longer and with all my might flung the lighted candle, and phantom Caroline fled to Hades or to limbo or to wherever such evil spirits abide.

Dawn broke over the earth as I set the candle again in its sconce, and from that night forwards I saw to it such candles were alight throughout the hours of darkness. Peter did not waken me that morning, and it was almost midday when I rang for him and thereafter found we faced new disasters. Mandrake's heating plant had gone awry. The telephone was a casualty of the night's storm, and we were as isolated as castaways on a desert isle, for both lanes and road to Scarletville were shoulder-high in drifts. Throughout the day every soul with strength to wield a shovel laboured at the task of clearing passageway from house to highway. Peter beside me in knee-high boots and raffish fur cap lost no jot of butlerish dignity. But labour as we would, night fell before the task was half done, and night brought discovery the electrics were also out of whack. In usual circumstances by hearth fire and candlelight Mandrake might well have been as comfortable as ever it had been in the day of the first Stephen, but Mandrake's circumstance was not usual, and wearily I made ready for a night of discomfort if not of danger. And at such time Benjamin Froste returned to my threshold and God knows he was welcome!

It would be reasonable to suppose Benjamin's experience on his first storm-ridden visit would cause him to be sure subsequent visits were accompanied by at least the promise of fair weather. But I had no more than sat at table when a great hullabaloo came up the lane, and shortly an amiable snow-eating monster snorted to the door, and close behind, borne by a hired sleigh, was Benjamin, very smug indeed at having wrested the service of the mechanical plough from Van Etten's town fathers. Nor did he come alone. Beside him rode a man so small and bundled at first I supposed him to be a lad, but he turned out to be a bland Oriental by name Tia Singhe, and I wondered why in the world Benjamin had chosen to bring a guest to Mandrake at such unfavourable time. Nevertheless I was pleased to vary the company of Peter and Jacob with that of other males and also by their coming to be enabled to send word to the various agencies in Van Etten of our nonfunctioning utilities.

With abundant food, blazing hearths and dozens of Jacob's lighted

candles my guests were comfortable enough. Mandrake's phantoms, pleased with Benjamin and his swarthy friend, for their benefit staged a well-arranged manifestation—not lusty enough to frighten the wit from them but still definite enough to make their presence known. It was then I learned why Benjamin had brought Tia Singhe to Mandrake. Tia was what I suppose might be called a “ghost-breaker *par excellence*.” He used no such obsolete methods as table-turning, séances or ouija boards, but a streamlined Oriental system warranted to get results. Results it got though I very much doubt if they were such as Singhe wished or expected.

At eleven o'clock that night the manifestations began. Glancing at my guests I wondered if they also were conscious of the peculiar humming sound which always accompanied Mandrake's unwanted visitors, such sound as might have been made by devilish fingers strumming a monstrous harp, or the wailing of countless damned souls. Under Froste's mask of nonchalance was very obvious fright, but Tia, poised on chair edge, thrust forwards his comic turbaned head something in the manner of a pointer scenting game, and it would not have astonished me had he jumped to the floor, curled an arm and stiffened his legs in a point. As the vibrations increased he seemed even more pleased and, suddenly scooting from the room, listened a moment in the corridor. Then he leaped up the stair like an agile and agitated monkey, and I half expected to have his body come hurtling down the stair well as had the body of valiant Mo. But beyond a startled squeak from Mistress Dottie and a blasphemous shout from Jacob, nothing happened.

Shortly the vibrations lessened until the ash pots no longer danced on the table and the floor trembling beneath our feet stilled. Almost immediately Tia descended smugly to where we awaited him, his arms clasped about his middle as if, holding vibrations in his pocket, he was apprehensive lest he lose them.

Until well towards midnight I chatted and drank with Benjamin. Tia sitting like a carved image, had little to say and did not drink at all. I explained the necessity of my guests occupying a chamber together. When Tia heard the reason for closing the north side of the corridor he immediately insisted in sleeping in the supposedly haunted suite, but as this would necessitate arousing Mistress Dottie to ready it, I demurred, telling the man thereafter he might sleep with phantom Caroline to his heart's content but for a single night

he must put up with Benjamin. Then bidding the twain good night I went into my bed and, in the glow of Jacob's protective candle, to sleep.

Again I was awakened by a wild-eyed Benjamin. Shaking me until my very teeth rattled, he gibbered, "Wake up, Steve! Wake up, for God's sake! Singhe is missing."

Singhe, I thought drowsily. Who in the world is Singhe, and why is he missing? Mumbling, I turned again to the business of sleep. But Benjamin, flipping covers from me, exposed bare shanks to an icy blast from the open windows. Leaping from the bed, I prepared to do battle for my comfort. "You're a rude fellow," I told him and sought to pull the covers from him.

"Come on, Steve," he coaxed. "Wake up, will you? This is one God-awful mess."

"What's a mess?" I yawned and sat hunched on the bed. "If you must chat at this unholy hour, close the window, will you?"

"Are you putting on an act?" Froste said angrily.

"An act? Why, no!" Then fully awake, I asked, "Is something wrong?"

"I'll tell the world!" howled Froste. "The guy who came here with me is gone. He's something special in the line of British citizenry, and if anything happens to him I'll certainly be in Dutch."

"Good Lord!" I said. "You mean the Oriental bloke has cut and run?"

"That's one way of putting it."

"Have you looked about?"

"I haven't done anything besides trying to get you out of bed."

I had opened the door into the hall-corridor before I remembered our electrics were not all they should be. However, the fire lighted the place well enough, and from the stairhead I saw the fire on the master floor was also ablaze. The remainder of the house was dark, but, dark or no, we must find the missing seer. Despite the blazing fires Mandrake House was chill. I flung a greatcoat over my robe, handed another to Benjamin, gave him a brace of lighted candles, grabbed a second brace myself. So we sallied into the mid-corridor.

Choosing the chambers on the north side to explore, I bade Froste search those on the south, and neither hide nor hair of Tia Singhe did we come upon. When we descended to the master floor we scanned its length and breadth, but Tia continued missing.

Gloomily I remembered that violent deaths are supposed to occur in runs of three and wondered if the small gentleman of the Orient was due to complete the run. With no pleasure at all I considered the reactions of the Van Etten constabulary if that came to pass.

By the time we had done with searching belowstairs I was so thoroughly chilled I could scarce move one foot past the other. No matter what fate had befallen the ghost-breaker I must warm my poor body before I got on with the search for him. First knocking up Jacob, I went to huddle in rapture over the blaze in my bed-chamber.

Before I was even reasonably warm Jacob arrived to ask the question he had so often asked in the miserable weeks since Christmas Eve: "What's goin' on, boss?"

"The gentleman who came with Mr. Froste seems to have vanished," I told him.

"He has, has he?" said Jacob as matter-of-factly as if vanishing Orientals were an everyday affair. "Where did he git to?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

"Didja search f'r him?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Upstairs and downstairs and in my lady's chamber," I chanted idiotically.

Jacob cocked a knowing eye at bottle and glass on the hearthside table, then wordlessly gimped down the passage to stare at Tia's empty bed.

"He ain't there all right," he rather needlessly announced on his return. Apparently doubting my sobriety or sanity, he turned to Froste. "Didja take a look around downstairs?" he asked.

Froste nodded.

"This floor?"

"We've pretty much searched everywhere."

"Try the garret?"

"Garret?" I questioned.

He hunched a shoulder ceilingwards. "Up there," he said.

I told him we were about to search the attic, that I had paused only long enough to warm myself.

"Keep on warmin' yerself," advised Jacob. "Gimme a coupla candles. I'll see what I kin find out."

Shortly we heard his uneven stride on the stair, then his triumphant shout, "He's up here all right," and before the echo of his voice ceased Froste and I, almost abreast, raced down corridor and up stair to halt beside Jacob at the threshold of the common room.

In a remote corner on the north side was Tia Singhe. Merely to behold him sent waves of goose-flesh down my spine. The attic was freezing cold, and the little man's hide was covered only by an old-fashioned nightshirt. The turban was gone from his shorn head and his bare shins had colouring of overripe plums, but clearly something more than physical comfort concerned the Oriental. Glazed eyes stared beyond his extended arms, and in the manner of a beast keeping wary eye on danger he turned his body furiously in a circle. Around and around he spun, the nightshirt billowing about his thin shanks, his opened mouth dripping saliva on his chest.

"Jeepers Creepers, ain't that somethin'?" inquired Jacob, and with more profanity than reverence Froste ejaculated, "Good God Almighty!"

"Whatta ya suppose he's up to?" asked Jacob seriously. When no one replied he continued: "Suppose he's a-makin' a spell or somethin'?"

"Singhe!" shouted Froste. "What are you doing? What's the matter with you?"

There was no reply, and industriously the fellow got on with his spinning. A bit of the bravo about him, Froste started across the room towards Tia, but Jacob, catching his arm, halted him. "If I was you I'd let him be," he cautioned. "'Tain't no good monkeyin' with stuff you don't savvy. Been in them Oh-ree-ental countries myself when I was a-sailin'. There's queer things goin' on in them places."

Apparently Froste thought well of Jacob's advice. He stayed where he was. All three of us stood regarding the dervishlike twirlings of Tia. Then, as once I had flung a candle towards phantom Caroline, I flung one towards the ghost-breaker. But like a mechanical top Tia spun on and on.

Beside me Jacob grinned. "Bum shot, boss," he said. Inching nearer the target, with a mighty heave he also flung his candle. Came a cry not of this earth. The dizzy gyrations of Tia Singhe ceased and he slumped forwards, to Jacob's shout, "Bull's-eye, by gosh!"

Quickly Froste gathered the small chap into his arms, bore him down the stair and to his bed and swathed the shivering body in blankets, while Jacob bountifully replenished the fire. Greatly I wanted to pour a reviving draught down Tia's gullet. Knowing his religion forbade it, I refrained. But there was nothing to hinder me from pouring a draught down my own, and I did so. In time the Oriental returned to earth and with no explanation of what happened to him begged us to be gone. I left his door on crack and led Jacob and Benjamin to my bedchamber and the brandy. In the hours following we swilled the bottle and the better portion of another. As dawn came I staggered to my bed, cogitating morosely that if Mandrake were not speedily rid of its evil, willy-nilly poor Stephen would go a drunkard to his grave.

The forenoon long on the next day Tia kept to his bed, while hordes of artisans descended on Mandrake and with clamour and great good will began setting our utilities to rights. With doors closed against their racket Froste and I sat in deep discussion before the library fire.

"I tell you, Steve," he said, "there is a damn sight more than ghosts mixed up in this business."

"Then you admit there are ghosts at Mandrake?"

"Call it ghosts, if you like. Something unnatural is going on. But to the best of my belief it's chiefly a human agency that is trying to get you out of Mandrake."

"What human agency—as you call it?"

"That I don't know, but if I don't find out it won't be from lack of trying."

"Suppose we are forced to leave Mandrake, what happens to Madam's fortune?"

Froste leaned forwards, elbows on thighs, fitting his fingers together one by one. "Sorry, Steve. I'm not at liberty to tell you."

"Is there an alternate legatee?"

"Yes."

"But you can't tell me who it is. Why not?"

"Madam Mandrake left a curious will," he answered, obviously avoiding my eyes. "Certain portions of it were not to be revealed to you unless you refused to accept, or failed to fulfill the conditions you already know."

"I see," I said, regarding Benjamin from an altogether new angle.

Suppose he were the alternate legatee and the human agency of whom he so glibly spoke was none other than himself, his seeming honesty another red herring drawn across my path. Was his avowal that he had known Sarah Mandrake but briefly and in a legal manner the truth, or was it not? Whatever way I regarded Benjamin I must consider that, if he was the alternate legatee, it would not be the first time a handsome young attorney profited by the death of an aged woman, under a will which he had framed himself. "Well, Stephen," I mumbled, "you simply can't go about distrusting everyone."

"What did you say?" asked Froste.

"Just talking to myself," I told him. "Pernicious habit, isn't it?"

He said no more and went back to his finger-matching. Suddenly he suggested: "Steve, suppose we give the cellars a good going-over."

"Whatever for?" I asked, startled.

"I don't know too much about mechanical doofangles, but it seems to me that what you call manifestations could be managed by—well, something like an intercommunication system."

Perhaps it was my bewildered expression which made him attempt explanation. "Maybe a smart guy could rig up some sort of an electrical gadget to produce shadows, groans and so on."

"Close doors too?"

"Sure, that's easy. Haven't you seen doors opened and closed by radio beam?"

I shook a negative head as Froste continued: "I'll bet that whole Christmas Eve shenanigan was a racket of some kind. If we could just find out what it was——" He left his words dangling.

Was Benjamin up to something? I wondered. I did not in the least understand what he meant to do, but if under any pretext he wished to search Mandrake's cellarage, there seemed little reason to hinder him.

In borrowed dungarees and with various implements also property of the artisans, almost inch by inch we measured length, breadth and depth of walls, ceilings and floorings, tapped for hollow space, listened for echoes. But when dusk fell, though we had analysed, computed and measured everything save the whitewash on the wall, we had brought to light not a single revealing thing. Coming again to the abovestairs portion of Mandrake House, I removed my filthy clothing in a very contemplative mood indeed. At luncheontime Tia

still lay abed. At the dinner hour he required nothing save to be let alone. Let him alone we did. Froste came to roost on the couch in my bedchamber.

The second morn we set about scanning cellarage under both north and south additions. Here the task was not so easy of accomplishment, for it was cold as the Arctics. Electrics had not been laid on. The space between overhead beams and the scrabbly dirt flooring was so sparse it was quite impossible to stand erect, and we had to go about our searching in the manner of inquisitive giant frogs bearing lighted torches. The north addition was the final one looked into. As we ascended the stair Peter stood awaiting us, and it seemed to me the man had lost more than a bit of his usual calm. For the second time I shed filthy garments in vastly contemplative mood.

Belowstairs at least, Froste was convinced neither mechanical nor spectral whatnots lurked among the ancient cobwebs and dust. But I, steaming in a welcome tub, reflected acidly that for all of our searching of the murky crannies of the cellarage, whole colonies of ghosts and goblins could forever dwell there undisturbed and, without fear of discovery, thumb insubstantial noses at the prying of mortal men.

I was sanguine Benjamin had forever erased from mind the possibility Mandrake was larded with clever contrivances which at finger flip produced groans, shrieks, whispers, et cetera, magically caused Stephen and his dogs to caper about and produced the lovely Caroline. It seemed to me that if the Carolines I had beheld could be produced, preferably in gross lots, and delivered behind the lines in various theatres of war, the chap responsible for her production would garner such amounts of siller the estate of Sarah Mandrake would indeed appear small tubers in comparison.

But it turned out Benjamin was nothing if not thorough. Immediately after luncheon once more we began search for mechanical whatnots, but with electrics and heating plant in full operation the task was vastly more comfortable. To prowl about cellars in great-coat and mittens, our way shown only by feeble torches, was one thing; to saunter about in warm, lighted rooms and chambers was delightfully another. In time, cupboard, wardrobes and closets had been thoroughly looked into, carpets removed, furniture shifted, walls tapped, flooring sounded, and every electric wire throughout the house traced to its source. We accomplished nothing save the ruffling of Peter's usually calm temper. As he served our coffee the

second evening he said, "May I have a word with you privately, sir?"

"Of course you may, Peter. Nothing wrong, I hope."

Peter hemmed politely behind two fingers. "I hope not indeed, sir," he said somewhat ambiguously.

Shortly I followed him to his pantry and asked, "What's up, Peter?"

"It's Ellen, sir."

"Ellen?"

"She's ill, sir. I'm a bit troubled about her. She forbade me ringing through to a physician, but if I may take the liberty of suggesting, sir——"

I did not wait for him to finish. "I'll have Dr. Vanningham come immediately. I'm sorry about Ellen. What seems to be the trouble?"

Peter dropped concealing lids over his eyes. "I couldn't say, sir." He hesitated a bit, then added: "I may be mistaken, sir, of course, but I think Ellen is concerned about you."

"About me?"

"She's a bit old-fashioned, sir. She fears you'll take harm from prowling about in the damp of the cellarage."

Much touched by Ellen's thought of my welfare, I rang through to Vanningham, asking him to come the same night. Though he growled mightily he came promptly enough.

As he returned from his visit to Ellen I waylaid him, bidding him halt for a doch-an-dorrach. To my surprise he refused somewhat brusquely, and still more brusquely replied to my query concerning Ellen.

"There's little wrong with Ellen," he told me, "except your damn witch-hunting."

"Witch-hunting! What do you mean?"

"Ellen is not what you'd call in her first youth, you know. All this prowling about hunting ghosts has upset her. She isn't ill now, but you keep on and she will be. Ghosts!" he snorted. "God Almighty!" And he added half-facetiously, "I've told Peter not to let anyone stick his nose inside the north addition without my say-so—get me?"

Then, seemingly in better humour, he slapped my shoulders lustily, said, "I'll take a rain check on that drink, Steve," and betook himself off, leaving me wondering if for some unknown reason I was being deliberately barred from the north addition. True, the cellarage, living room and two of the bedchambers had been well scanned.

The third bedchamber—Ellen's—remained unsearched. Broodingly I considered this fact, but making neither head nor tail of it I returned to Benjamin and the brandy bottle.

On the third morning when Froste descended to breakfast a somewhat wan Oriental accompanied him. If Tia Singhe's flesh was weak, his spirit was not, and immediately he had done with his food he set about the business for which he had come to Mandrake, ridding it of its spectres. His plan for so doing was entirely unorthodox, for, as I understood the matter, he proposed to lure them from their haunts, give them a terrific going-over and bid them go elsewhere to get on with the business of making human moan in their sleep. Presumably after he had told them off, shamefaced ghost and goblin, phantom, spectre and wraith would pack their luggage and depart. But it seemed to me such old-fashioned spirits as roamed Mandrake House might well take umbrage and refuse to be ordered about, and furthermore I doubted if Occidental ghost would come at the call of an Oriental Pied Piper. Nor did it seem reasonable phantoms so well established as ours would leave comfortable lodgings because a small brown chap they never saw before in their lives bade them to do so.

However, Tia had already had a bad time of it, and I had no wish to discourage him. His preamble to ghost-breaking was more than a bit farfetched. Immediately after his breakfast he had skipped upstairs, to return with a weirdly designed and coloured casket. Squatting on the floor of the master corridor he drew forth, not zodiacal thingumbobs, but mundane calipers, scale compass and so forth. Then he inscribed a huge scarlet square in the very centre of the floor, and within the square a yellow circle, and within the circle an eight-point blue star. When he had done I rather expected him to produce chessmen or draughts from thin air and, materializing a spectre, challenge him to a bout. Beyond the gaudy square, in black chalking Tia traced a veritable pathway of cabalistic characters cross the corridor to the stair, and thereafter on each step, continuing in the mid-corridor to the very threshold of the Caroline suite, at which place he inscribed another square, the colouring in reverse, and the star having but seven points. He paused from his labours for long enough to partake of luncheon and again at teatime, but, declining dinner, kept on with his drawings. When they were to his liking he looked them over carefully then retired into contemplation and his bedchamber in preparation for his labours on the morrow.

Benjamin, having convinced himself Mandrake's ghosts were not produced by humanly operated mechanics, bestrode his other theory—that someone altogether familiar with Mandrake knew a good deal more of the missing jewels than he had acknowledged. He began checking possibilities. The two persons having unlimited access to the house were Vanningham and Jacob Schultz. The two who had been in direct and constant contact with Sarah Mandrake were Peter and Ellen. Satisfied the jewels were still in Mandrake House, he proposed to assemble the four suspect persons, dramatically announce the house was about to be closed, and ponder reactions of each person present.

At his suggestion I rang through to Vanningham, asking him to come to Mandrake that night, and bade Peter, Ellen and Jacob Schultz be in readiness to present themselves when sent for. My part in the scheme was also to consider and watch reactions, in time to compare them with Benjamin's, and well I knew Benjamin was leaning on a broken reed, for if ever a person be totally unable to read human physiognomy that person is I. As guarantee of this I offer the remarkable losses sustained in every poker game ever I indulged in. Benjamin, however, was most insistent on my service, and nine of the clock found me nervously pacing the library waiting for Vanningham. He was prompt enough, and with a sickish grin I poured him a generous potion, never opening my mouth as to why he had been summoned. He seemed entirely satisfied to settle himself with a glass and a lengthy cigar bestowed by Benjamin.

After a brief bit of chatting, signalled by Froste's lifted eyebrow, feeling a good deal of a fool, I summoned Peter, Jacob and Ellen. I thought Vanningham seemed somewhat astonished at Ellen's presence, for that morning he had again attended her professionally, but he said nothing beyond a brief inquiry how she did. In his best legal manner Benjamin bade everyone take seats—which was useless pleasantry, for Jacob already sprawled comfortably in a hearth-side chair, and both Peter and Ellen would have considered themselves guilty of mortal sin if ever they sat in the presence of their betters. They stood side by side, very much resembling a small wary feline protected by an overlarge bland tomcat.

When we were well settled, Froste stood straddle-legged before the hearth and began his harangue by assuring everyone he very much disliked having to say what he was about to say. This patently was a bloody lie, and we knew it to be a bloody lie, but as no one was

in a position to refute it Benjamin was permitted to go on. At great length and in pompous judicial phrase he pointed out that Sarah Mandrake had selected him both as legal adviser and administrator of her estate, that under certain terms embodied in the Mandrake will he was to continue his service over a period of years, and thus at the present moment was acting as my legal adviser as well.

Insomuch as, through no fault of my own, Mandrake House had become perilous as a residence, under his advice I was about to quit occupancy and join my family elsewhere either permanently or until certain disturbances now prevalent were eliminated. Therefore, those present had been assembled to be advised that a fortnight hence Mandrake House would be closed, and in lieu of the usual thirty-day notice, each member of the staff would be given sixty-days' stipend.

At this point Vanningham grunted and inquired, "How about me, Froste? I can't see where the stipend, as you so elegantly call it, applies to me, or the closing of Mandrake either. But it must, otherwise why was I invited to attend this shindig?"

With a sickish grimace, Froste said, "You have special billing, Doc. We'll go into your case later."

"O.K., big boy, but to induce pleasant contemplation the while, about how much ready cash, roughly speaking, can I expect?"

Beyond a second grimace Froste made no reply, but got on with a tremendous amount of detail having to do with the abandonment of Mandrake.

When he halted for breath, with apologetic cough, Peter said, "Pardon me, sir, but may I inquire concerning various arrangements? I believe the additions are served from the central plant in the house proper. It would be necessary to continue heating the entire property, would it not?"

There was a long silence, and then Froste flung a verbal grenade for he said, "As executor it is my privilege to close the additions as well as the main house, if through necessity and over an extended period Mandrake is abandoned."

"I'm sorry, sir," said Peter, "but that was not my understanding. Madam specifically explained to me and to Ellen we were to live in the north addition as long as ever we chose without being subject to any restraint whatsoever."

"Perhaps that was your understanding of the matter, Peter, but in point of law, an oral promise does not outweigh conditions set down in black and white."

"It was also my understanding the conditions were set down in black and white, if I may take the liberty of repeating your words, sir."

"Have you read Madam Mandrake's will, Peter?"

"Not exactly, sir."

"What do you mean by 'Not exactly'?"

Peter hesitated, then went desperately on, "Madam was good enough to permit me to see the rough draft of her will, sir."

"When?"

"As I remember, it was about a half-year prior to her decease, sir."

"For what reason was the draft shown you?"

"I was something of a clerk to Madam, sir. Indeed I might claim *ipso facto* to have been her secretary."

I contemplated shouting, "Hear! Hear!" and applauding Peter's erudition. Vanningham did bark one abrupt gust of mirth, but the room became utterly silent as Froste said ominously, "As I understand you, before Madam Mandrake's death you knew she had bequeathed you twenty-five thousand dollars and tenancy of the addition?"

"Yes, sir."

"That she bequeathed a like amount to Ellen?"

"Yes, sir."


"You have recently married Ellen, have you not?"

Before Peter could answer there was ample excuse for Vanningham's presence, for Ellen Meadows crumpled to her knees and fell forwards in a forlorn little jumble of clothing, and for a long moment I thought Peter about to join her. Certainly Froste's plotting had achieved result of a sort, but what the result would be I did not know at all, nor did Froste. For a full hour after Ellen had been borne to her bed, Vanningham sat with us. He who had once advised that I leave Mandrake now as emphatically advised against so doing, pointing out the time given Peter to provide a home for Ellen was almost inhumanly scant, calling attention to their unfamiliarity with the United States, to Ellen's but recently healed arm and poor general health. When the good doctor betook himself off he left behind him two dithering gentlemen unable to decide if Vanningham was upset by my intended departure from Mandrake, or by Peter's and Ellen's.

I was not displeased at failure of Benjamin's silly scheme, nor that he spent the night tossing on his couch as uneasily as ever I did in my bed.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

N THE morning after Froste's macabre soiree, I awakened to find him sitting upright on his couch, hearkening so intently his ears stood quite laterally out from his skull.

"Almighty God!" he squeaked. "What's that?"

And I, with great tides of goose-flesh swishing up and down my spine, also hearkened to the most ungodly sounds that ever smote a human ear.

"Perhaps Mandrake's spirits are holding carnival," I said, "or rehearsing a new act."

Benjamin blinked hopelessly, groped for his spectacles and, when they were safely astraddle his nose, peered at his wrist watch.

"It's five-ten," he explained indignantly, with implication no respectable ghost would be caught off base at such hour. But dismally I recalled Mandrake's phantoms were not at all respectable, that they haunted when and where they chose, and were as likely to be come upon when the sun was shining as in the dark of the moon.

I donned what I had come to consider my spectre-hunting garb and, bearing with me a lighted ghost-blasting candle, stepped warily into the corridor. While here I found nothing more alarming than firelight flickering over Tia's gaudy handiwork, it was evident witches' Sabbath was going on belowstairs. Leaning as far over the stair well as I might without falling into it, I beheld Tia squatting in the very centre of his largest cabalistic square, either hand resting on opposite shoulder, his weirdly clad body swaying to and fro, and from side to side, his voice raised in raucous singsong. Though I inadvertently dripped the wax from my candle over his turbaned head, the rhythm of his hair-raising chant neither ceased nor faltered. I began to believe

the little man had something, for no ghost in sane sense, unless it were altogether tone-deaf, would tarry in a place with such racket going on.

By the time we descended to breakfast the industrious ghost-breaker had squatted and chanted on each and every chalking the corridor's length. By midmorn he was halfway up the stair, and at luncheon was putting everything he had in squat and chant at the threshold of Caroline's bedchamber. Thereafter I had hope our tortured ears might rest, but Tia was altogether thorough. He began all over again in reverse, squatting and chanting all the afternoon, and at nightfall had got back to his starting point.

When Benjamin had all he could endure, somewhat sullenly he set out to tramp Mandrake Lane, and thence God knows where—but I'd wager a bright penny he kept far and wide of Mandrake Wood. Without hardihood to brave wind and weather, I ascended to the common room, not only to rest my eardrums but also if possible to discover what in the world had set Tia Singhe to spinning like a top. No matter by what road the subject of his antics was approached, he blandly evaded attempt to find what made him spin or why he had ascended to the attic floor.

The topmost storey of Mandrake is the one portion which has been altogether modernized. There are no dark nooks or dusty crannies or hanging webs. The four corners of the room wherein Madam Mandrake installed the electrical heating furnace are rounded in supersanitary effort, the flooring is brightly covered with cork substance, and the room well lighted by two windows facing the north addition, and a huge arc light in the centre of the ceiling. There was no possible hiding place for ghosts or mortals. The common room also was much too modern to house comfortably those newly risen from their graves. It has five of the seven dormers facing the river and by actual count a round dozen of wall brackets and a ceiling chandelier as well. Beyond the common room is the attic storage space, also well lighted, having the remaining dormers and four windows facing south. There are boxes, trunks and crates galore and much castaway gear of other eras. But the room is orderly and clean as is all of Ellen's housekeeping.

Truly there was no answer to the riddle of Tia's gymnastics to be had on the attic floor, but as I returned to the common room for a last peep at the winter sun sinking behind the hills, I heard again

and clearly the chiming clock, and as I had done each time I heard it, I made mental note to ask concerning it.

When the tea bell rang I descended, warily skirting the busy Oriental, and may I again behold something as comic as Peter in all dignity with his tea tray stepping nonchalantly over the chalkings and about the ghost-breaker, as if such things were part and parcel of Mandrake's everyday life!

From Benjamin I learned that Tia, foodless and drinkless, must ceaselessly chant for a full twenty-four hours, and I wondered drearly how I was going to sleep if the infernal noise went on outside my door. Without Tia Singhe and almost in silence we dined, and thereafter the evening crept on leaden feet. I had little faith in Tia's ability to rid Mandrake of its ghosts. Not for a moment did I believe they would come at his call but despite all this I was scared to death. If Benjamin spoke suddenly I gasped like a fish, and when he knocked the dottle from his pipe of their own volition my two legs sprang from the floor. Benjamin had no more stability than I. When Jacob flung an armful of wood into the mid-corridor box above us, in unison with jangled nerves we leaped bodily from our chairs.

At ten o'clock I decided I'd do my suffering supine and, following Froste abovestairs, saw to it not only was there profuseness of spectre-dispelling candles at hand, but a brace of brandy bottles as well. Sleepless, I heard the clock in the master corridor strike ten, strike eleven, midnight. Mandrake House remained altogether serene. I wondered if its spectres were snubbing Tia or if his unceasing sing-song had frightened them into packing phantasmagorical luggage in preparation for flight.

It was well after one when I fell asleep. I swear I never heard a sound from that hour until eight in the morning when Peter set frantic knuckles to my panels. It was no morning cup he bore but the ill tidings that Tia lay below in the hall-corridor seemingly very dead indeed. Pell-mell I bolted down the stair, Benjamin following after.

Folded like a jackknife, chin touching knees in the very centre of his gaudy star, the sorry fellow lay inert.

"Singhe," whispered Froste. "Wake up, Singhe." He lifted a skinny paw and shook it vigorously. Singhe neither moved nor answered. When Benjamin raised one lid and the other, stony eyes stared into mine, and I with backward leap gained the wall, leaned

against it and wiped the sweat from my clammy brow with a trembling corner of my robe.

"Is—is he dead?" I quavered in Froste's general direction.

"I guess so," he answered. "I can't find a pulse. He doesn't seem to be breathing either."

"Why, I thought this sort of bloke didn't die at all," I ventured witlessly.

Froste glared at me. Then turning to where Peter stood, he asked, "Where's Jake Schultz?"

"It's a bit early for him, sir. Is there anything I may do?"

"Phone Vanningham," Froste bade him.

But it was I who, after closing the door between me and the thing huddled grotesquely on the floor, lifted the receiver from the cradle and murmured Vanningham's number. I wondered how best I could word my summons.

Immediately it became patent the good doctor still held my "witch-hunting" against me. "Oh," he said very unpleasantly indeed, "it's you, is it?"

"Why, yes, it is. Can you nip around directly?"

"Who needs me?"

"Well, no one exactly," I jibbered obtusely, considering possible listening ears. Then thinking I'd lighten the situation with a bit of fun I added: "Er-er you recall the rain check you asked for the other evening. Would you fancy taking it up now?"

There was a silence, a very deep one in fact, before Vanningham spoke. "Are you drunk at this hour of the morning, Steve, or are you just plain nuts?"

Before I could answer the connection was severed, and it seemed no time at all until I heard Vanningham's voice in the hall-corridor. "What the hell is the matter with Steve?" he roared. There was movement, indistinct words, then the library door was flung open and Vanningham at the telephone was demanding an ambulance.

"Is he dead?" I asked a second time that morning.

"Damn near to it." Then he curiously asked, "What happened to him?"

"I don't know."

Vanningham lighted his cigarette and said reflectively, "You don't know, Froste doesn't know, Peter doesn't know."

"Jacob—" I offered placatingly—"did you ask Jacob?"

"He isn't here, but if he was he wouldn't know either." He shook his head lugubriously. "This is the God-damnedest house." He groaned wearily as he went to open the door to the bearers. Shortly Tia Singhe was borne slowly down Mandrake Lane.

The day was well over before we knew that for this time at least the small Oriental gentleman had escaped the dreadful kindness of morticians. I never again beheld the ghost-breaker, nor knew what befell on the night he lay broken and more than half-dead in embrace of his gaudy chalkings; never knew what came to him on the attic floor. As he lay in the Van Etten Hospital he frantically refused to see either Benjamin or me, and when later Froste sought him in his usual haunts he was not there.

In time Benjamin went his way and again I was left alone to deal as best I could with Mandrake's problems. Sane Christian practice as exemplified by Vicar Wilroy had given but slight pause to Mandrake's ghosts; they had altogether won the battle with occultism, and, though I had come to hate the sound of the word "exorcism," there remained only that to rid the ancient house of its evil. Yet I was frightened of it. Humbly I sought out Father Gillis and into his almost incredulous ears poured tale of ghost and goblin and told him of my visit to the Exorcist father in New York. And Father Gillis also stressed upon me that only in most dire extremity must the rite be practiced, but agreed that Mandrake's plight was indeed extreme. There were, however, things on which we did not agree.

"Am I mistaken in supposing you consider one of these spirits to be of good intent?" the priest asked.

"Of very good intent, Father."

"Why do you think so?"

"More than once we have had direct evidence of its friendliness."

Father Gillis sighed. "The Devil assumes many disguises, Mr. Mandrake. Holy Church teaches that only spirits of evil are doomed to walk the earth. The blessed dead are with their God."

"Father, I'd wager my life that Stephen Mandrake is not evil."

"You have no way of knowing that, my son. I must warn you that if, by God's grace, I am given power to flay wandering spirits from your home, no single one may be set apart or differently dealt with."

For a bit we sat in silence. Then the priest said, "Consider this

matter well, Mr. Mandrake. Then if you require my ministration, I will come to you gladly."

He walked with me to the door speaking of more cheerful matters and, as I bade him good-bye, warned me again to consider at length the matter of exorcising Mandrake's unwanted visitors. I had no need to consider. I well knew before I would condemn Stephen Mandrake to hell I would go forever from Mandrake House.

So, thanking the good priest for proffered assistance, I turned again towards home, and no sooner had I crossed the threshold when I came upon Jacob Schultz, an ear thrust against the wall, crawling about the library floor on his belly.

"Jacob Zachariah," I said, "a word in your ear."

Agilely he arose, meticulously brushed his lone trouser leg, regarded his wooden appendage as if he'd never before beheld it, and then shifting his ever-present tobacco "cud" inquired naïvely, "What say, boss?"

Regarding him wryly, I said, "I think a trifle of chat is indicated. Come along, fellow-me-lad."

In my bedchamber I bade Jacob to sit, and after replenishing the hearth so bounteously it was quite impossible to breathe less than half the chamber away, he lowered himself to a corner of the couch and warily waited for me to speak.

"Jacob," I began, "as you very well know, there are now but five persons living in Mandrake House. While you do not actually reside here I'm including you among them for the reason you are in the house a vast amount of your time." I paused both for Jacob's comment and because I was not at all certain how to get on with my impromptu harangue. But clearly Jacob was going to be of no assistance whatever. He sat like a somewhat subdued raptorial watching opportunity to flee or attack.

I continued: "There is a great deal of pother going on that neither Mr. Froste nor I understand, but we understand well enough that certain persons at Mandrake know a great deal about these outrageous occurrences and we shall leave no stone unturned to find out who these persons are."

"Who do you suspicion, boss?" asked Jacob brightly.

"Mr. Froste suspects everyone, Jacob." After pausing to permit my words to have proper appeal, I continued, "And I suspect everyone save yourself."

But apparently Jacob's mind turned more to Benjamin's attitude than my slightly pathetic own. "Froste goes the whole hog, huh?" he inquired.

"In a manner of speaking, Jacob, yes, he does."

Jacob arose, thrust open a casement, unlatched the weather window and spat into the snow. But when he again sat in his corner he said nothing at all and I got somewhat confusedly on. "Jacob," I said, "if ever I have definite reason to think you are diddling me, I'll probably cut my throat."

Jacob regarded me with meditative expression. "Wouldn't do that, boss," he said, "not just yet anyways. Mebbe after a while things'll better 'emselves."

"Do you really think they might, Jacob?"

"Can't tell. 'Twon't do any harm to wait awhile an' see."

"You understand you are the lone person here on whom I rely, do you not?"

Jacob beamed. "Thanks, boss," he said, "thanks a lot," and immediately betook himself off without offering the least reason for his crawling about.

For days on end Ellen went sad and sorry, so swollen of eye I writhed inwardly in pity, and then one morning as I sat breakfasting she came timidly to me and said, "May I have a word with you, sir?"

"Of course you may, Ellen."

"Mr. Mandrake, if you will give leave for us to remain in the north addition Peter and I will manage quite well without heat from the central plant."

"It would not be only heat you must do without, Ellen, but water and electrics also. To prevent pipeage from freezing water must be drained off, and of course there would be no sense to continue current when the house may be closed indefinitely."

"I quite understand, sir, but would the stables also be closed?"

This was something which had not entered my mind, nor did I believe Froste had given consideration to the subject in the supposed abandonment of Mandrake. I made shift to answer Ellen's inquiry as best I might. "I suppose they will, Ellen, but I wouldn't like to say yea or nay positively."

"Haven't you the say-so, sir?"

"Yes, yes, of course I have. But I think it wise to leave these matters to Mr. Froste."

"May I disagree, sir?"

"I suppose you may, Ellen. But why are you so determined to remain at Mandrake? I should think you and Peter would like to see a bit of the country. I understand Florida is wonderful at this season, California also and—oh, various other states."

For a breath Ellen hesitated, then said, "We love Mandrake, sir. We thought it our home forever. But if I may say so, sir, it isn't a home to Mr. Froste, nor does he love it. It's just a handsome property he has the handling of, sir."

"I quite see what you mean, Ellen, but you know it has become impossible for my family to live at Mandrake, and as much as I regret it I'm afraid there's nothing to be done save close the house."

"It was closed for so very long, sir," said Ellen softly.

"I know, Ellen, and no one is more sorry than I that it must again be closed, but I am convinced Mr. Froste's decision is wise."

"You will not permit us to remain, sir?"

"How could you remain, Ellen, without heat or water or electrics?"

"We could draw water at the stables, sir, or if the stables are closed, from the well on Jacob's property. There're hearths in every room in the addition, and as for electrics, sir, I was a grown woman before ever I laid eye on the like. We'd manage splendidly, I'm sure, sir."

Then soundlessly Ellen began to weep, her tears running in pitiful fashion down her cheeks, staining the tight silk bodice with infinitesimal spots, and I, with no twinge of conscience, threw Benjamin and his plotting overboard.

"Very well, Ellen," I consoled her, "as you mentioned, I have the say-so of Mandrake House, and for all of me you can without hindrance live in your addition for ever and ever, amen."

For the first time Ellen Meadows sat in my august presence, needs must, for her legs buckled under her and I was obliged to lift the little person and plump her into a chair. As she wept silently on I very much felt like mingling my tears with hers, ruminating. If Ellen Meadows has sinister intent towards Mandrake or towards my witless self, very well, let her have them, but in God's name let her not weep over it. Tears I cannot stand.

But Ellen still clasped and unclasped her hands, gazed down at me with tears swimming beneath her lids. "Peter's fetching your dinner, sir. I do hope it's to your fancy." She turned away and began clearing the hearthside table for the tray which shortly Peter bore into the room.

It was more to please Ellen than for hunger's sake that I arose, donned boots and robe and gobbled to the last crumb, all of the time very conscious something was awry with Ellen Meadows. More than once it seemed to me she made effort either to ask or to tell me something, and each time Peter suavely halted her. At last, turning silent supplicating eyes towards me, she went away.

"What's up with Ellen?" I asked Peter.

"She's worried about you, sir. She is convinced you are ill."

I did not at all believe Peter's avowal, but, despite my concern for Ellen and a too-full belly, the door had no more than closed on Peter when I was again under the covers and half-asleep.

Twelve full hours I slept, then wakened to the corridor clock striking three solemn tones. Well rested and in more wholesome state of mind, I propped the pillows behind me and lighting a cigarette sat smoking, cogitating and turning over in mind the possibility of retaining my inheritance by building on Mandrake land a new and smaller dwelling, and leaving the ancient house forever to its phantoms. Then far away I heard a woman weeping grievously, and as I hearkened knew it to be no ghostly lament but expression of intense human woe. Tossing aside bedcovers, I strode to listen at Jacob's corner chamber, but nothing save his nocturnal gasping and the bubbling breath of Mistress Dottie came to ear. I did not rouse them, for at that moment there seemed no need, and I returned to my bedchamber to hear again the muted indrawn sobbing of a human woman. In the chamber next to my own, and in the one beyond, the weeping was inaudible. But I heard it in the corridor, and very plainly indeed in the Caroline suite.

I went again to my own bedchamber, drew breeks and gown over bed gear, filled my pockets with Jacob's candles and ascended to the attic floor. In the common room and furnace room to the north the weeping was most distinct. As I stood bemused and ruminating I heard again the silvery chiming clock, and before the last stroke Mandrake began anew its dreadful humming vibrations. I fled, staggering drunkenly over the swaying floor. Pell-mell down the stair I

went and, gaining my own threshold, flung the door to, drew massive bolt and, well winded, stood clinging to the frame. And then I beheld Jacob, garbed even to his peg leg, holding Mistress Dottie, in no more than a coy rosy gown, within the crook of his arm and both braced with might and main against the passage door.

"Spooks, boss?" shouted Jacob happily, above the whining clamour.

I made no answer to his questions but shouted also, "Bolt that door, Jacob!" As Jacob, casting Mistress Dottie adrift, did so, I stood, gap-mouthed, beholding Bedlamish antics of the books leaping from their shelving, pictures swaying dizzily on wires, and the pair of delft lamps beside the bed teetering crazily and crashing in countless atoms to the floor, the shades rolling in ever-widening circles at my feet, while overhead lights of the ceiling chandelier glowed blood-red, then abruptly merged with darkness.

Came hasty scratch of a lucifer, and Jacob set alight candles on the mantelshef which immediately began slithering crazily from one end to the other in a toboggan of melted wax. Lest they fall and fire the drugget beneath, I leaped to hold them staunch, but had not reached the hearth when, with groan of riven wood, the bolt tore free, on screaming hinge the door crashed backwards against the wall, and as if this were touchstone the whining vibrations of the house ceased, the chamber's furnishings were done with giddy antics, and the heavy door swung idly to and fro. Then without reason, before my very eyes, the corridor burst into flame, and if on that night Mandrake had burnt to cinders I had not the hardihood to cross the chamber's threshold into the bewitchments which lay behind.

Not so Jacob Schultz. "Jee-soo-pratt!" he howled. "Leggo me, Dottie!" With tremendous swinging of peg leg he gained the corridor, only to return immediately choking, strangling and blaspheming. He seized the metal coal hod, filled it at the bathing tap and flung it over the blazing drugget with as much effect as if standing at the threshold he had spat into the flames.

Even from the distance of months the horror of that dreadful night remains with me, yet certain facts of it I remember only with obscene mirth. When first we came to Mandrake its storage bins and tall cupboards were a source of delight to Kate, holding as they did discards of well over a century, and among them she had chanced upon a score of chamber pots, relics of an era when other form of

toilettries were sparse or altogether unknown. They ranged from the smallest of floral delft nursery potties to huge crockery family vessels, and included dainty boudoir affairs of garlanded china, and a few of silver, the handles formed of coy bowknots, the edges smoothly rolled for comfort. Kate saw to it the ancient vessels were cleaned until their garlands glowed anew and every bowknot and scroll was burnished and fine, and then for very mischief she stored them in quaint rows behind the doors of a cupboard in our bedchamber, now and again to cause hilarious furor by exhibiting them. But on the night of Mandrake's fire they served as gallant a purpose as ever they did in their heyday.

As Jacob frenziedly dot-and-carried with his small hod of water, I just as frenziedly sought a vessel to do like service and then thought of the chamber pots. I wrenched open the cupboard door, selected a sizable utensil, thrust it upon Mistress Dottie, seized a second one for myself. Then we hastened to do yeoman's service between bathing tap and burning drugget. To me Mistress Dottie, her gown clinging limply to her buttocks, clasping the huge overflowing crockery to her bosom, appeared neither droll nor unusual.

For seemingly endless hours we laboured lustily, and as comic as were our vessels, nevertheless they were effective, and at last no flame was left to quench. There was only a chaos of seared wood, blackened plaster, and the sodden rags which had once been a handsome carpet. When the precious pots again sat on their shelves, I set about search for such garments as might cover the wet and weary Mistress Dottie, Jacob and myself. Never did I behold a pair who so closely resembled Jack Spratt who would eat no fat, and his wife who would eat no lean, as Jacob and his bride clad in my misfitting garments.

For perhaps a full half-hour Mandrake was as quiet as the grave. Then with a mighty wrench the bedchamber door again tore loose, and again I strove to hold it secure, shouting to Jacob to make barricade. With Mistress Dottie he pushed, pulled and hauled wardrobe and table, shelving and chesterfield willy-nilly against the door. To this day the mark of their feet mar the flooring, and never shall they be erased lest I grow smug and ungrateful for the peace we have come to know.

When we sought to thrust the bed into the barricade I found the frame was bolted to the wooden panelling at the head, the feet to

the dais, and on this isle of safety we clung while the furnishings resumed their crazy movements. For aeons and aeons we crouched, Jacob and I, holding the tearful Mistress Dottie between, hearkening to sound of scurrying feet, sound of snarling dogs, to the dreadful whining house. It is God's truth that night I thought that we must surely die, that Mandrake's angry spectres sought revenge for my plan to return them again to their everlasting limbo.

A woman screamed dreadfully and long, no mortal woman as before but a bawd of hell let loose upon the earth. Only half-living I hearkened for other dreadful sounds, perhaps the tap of Devil hoofs as he came to drag us, agonized, to hell. And then I heard Mandrake's ancient house door groan on its hinges and fling against the wall. For the second time that night the whining tremors lessened and were done, and though I did not know it then, were done forevermore.

With cramped thews I crept from the bed and stood stretching and rubbing deadened limbs. Jacob crept forth also, stirred the fire into a blaze, pressed a finger on the wall button, but no light answered his touch, and save the dim hearth glow the chamber was in darkness until after groping among the debris, he drew forth the fallen candles, touched a lucifer to them and we stood bedazed and blinking. On the bed Mistress Dottie whimpered briefly, then quickly was asleep. Pale fingers of new day crept beneath the window draperies. I drew them aside and, as God is my judge, I beheld Stephen Mandrake, his dogs beside him, not as a shade but as solid flesh, standing whip in hand before the threshold of Mandrake House. And then from morning mist Caroline took shape, beguiling phantom Caroline, her beckoning eyes smiling as they had smiled on me. Darkly the twain stood etched against the morning sky as dawn grew bright and brighter.

From the wide-flung door of Mandrake another woman came, a slender woman with dark smooth hair and dimpled laughing face, a woman who wore no such ancient garb as Caroline or Stephen, but a modish gown wrought by a needle of no longer ago than yesterday. Stephen, turning to her a lover's face, drew her quickly to him. The whip fell from his hand into the snow. Then, his dogs gambolling beside him, holding the lovely wraith within the circle of his arm, Stephen Mandrake went slowly down the terrace and merged into the light of day.

With dreadful lips snarling over dreadful teeth, her clawed hands raised shoulder high, the spectral Caroline watched them go. A step

she followed, and another, until Stephen's dogs turned again to harry her. From below the cliffs a drifting vaporous cloud floated towards where she stood, and then was a cloud no longer but undulating gelatinous semblance of a man, water adrip from arms and riverweed twined about quivering flesh. Again came the eldritch scream. The phantom woman fled towards the shadows of Mandrake Wood. With grotesque wobblings, the Thing followed after. And then they too were gone. Rosy tint of sun coloured the eastern sky.

Never did Caroline return, nor Stephen, nor his brace of phantom dogs. Mandrake is at peace and God willing will remain forever at peace.

I turned from the window, with Jacob freed the door of its barricade, and as well as might be we set the sorry room to rights. Then we went to stare awe-stricken at the shambles of the corridor. The casements of coloured glass torn from their hinges lay shattered over the dower chest beneath. The huge mirror framed into the plastering at the stairhead was riven into atoms, the settles were charred and burned, the lovely old mantel and the painted wild geese framed above it. Nor were these the only tokens of the night's terrors, for in the Caroline suite its damask panelling hung in forlorn rags, and the tinted garlands of the ceiling lay powdered plaster on the floor. The tester of the eerie bed was flung in a jumble of silk on the dais, and the painted Caroline swung dismally from a single cord. But strangely enough, save this and my own, no other chamber in Mandrake bore mark of chaos, but the circling stair was charred in curious pattern as if trodden by burning feet, and to this day the pattern remains for the confusion of skeptics.

In lesser degree belowstairs Mandrake had felt the touch of ghostly malice. In the pantry lay a welter of twisted blackened silver, of shattered crystal and china, but beyond in the dining room Stephen still smiled from the wall and nothing was awry save the imprint of a hand burned into the surface of the table. This too remains mute testimony that demons still prowl the earth.

In the library the leaded doors had been wrenched from the tall old secrétaire, and Mandrake's age-brittle books scattered far and wide. The ancient corridor clock lay face down, its strokes still marking the hour as if Time everlastingly defied the phantoms which had wrought it mischief. Mandrake's huge door swung idly on its hinges. For a little I stood breathing air into my lungs, and then, remembering Stephen's gestures, groped in the snow—and 'tis God's truth

I came upon his whip. Bearing it with me I went again into the house, wondering confusedly how spirit hands might bear a whip wrought of hide and silver. Yet bear it they had, and to this day it lies beneath the portrait in which the painted Stephen holds it lightly on his knee.

I bade Jacob brew coffee. As I stood warming my hands about the heated cup the clock struck eight and again fear struck at me. It was unprecedented at such hour Peter and Ellen should not be about their duties. Quickly I went to knock the door into the north addition. There was no answer. I waited for a little before I twisted the knob, and for the first time since ever I came to Mandrake found the door free of its bolt. On a couch before the cold hearth Peter lay, clothed and asleep, and though long enough I stood beside him he did not waken and I turned again towards the passageway.

To this day I do not know what urged me towards the stair. Perhaps it was concern lest the night's mischief had touched Ellen. With no thought of spying, I ascended and thrust open the door into a chamber I knew to be hers, for twice briefly I had searched it, once on the night small Sarah had vanished and again on Christmas Eve, but Ellen was not within and the bed was smooth and untouched. Hastily I peered into the remaining chambers, and into the bathing room. Ellen was not abovestairs, nor was she in the room where Peter lay, nor in all Mandrake House. For a second time I asked myself, Where is Ellen Meadows? Again I stood in her chamber marvelling it should be the biding place of such prim soul as Ellen—spacious, elegant and feminine, draped in costly damask, carpeted handsomely and holding abundance of ornaments and of silver and china. By no twist of fancy could I envision Ellen asleep beneath the silken covers of the bed, or Peter at ease in one of the dainty chairs.

Between chimneypiece and the panelled wall a pencil line of shadow reached from floor to ceiling. My curiosity aroused, I went to it, ran my fingers along the space, and to my mystification a panel swung inwards, disclosing a narrow ascending stair. For a little I stood gaping and staring, then step by step went cautiously upwards until my head emerged into murky darkness. A single tiny flame, seemingly suspended in air, flickered dimly, and from the circle of light my own face peered back at me. A silvery-toned clock chimed and struck the hour, a clock so often heard from distance but now so near its ticking echoed the beating of my heart.

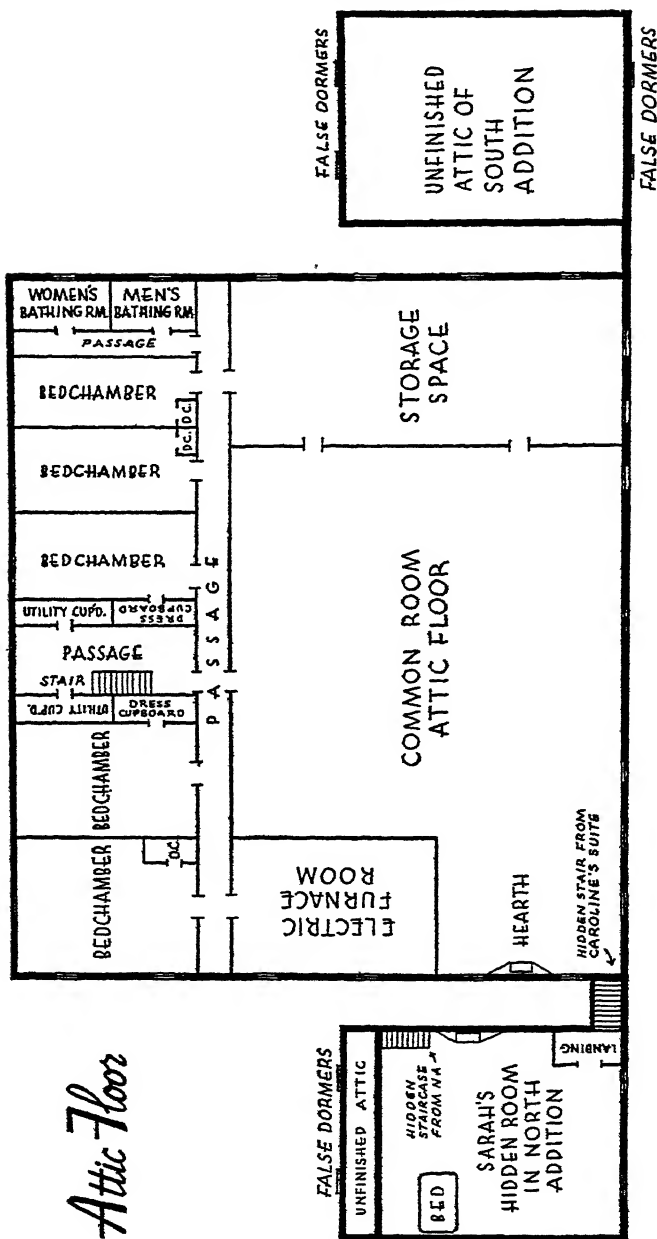
My knees buckled and lest they altogether fail I went slowly backwards, counting each step to reassure my tottering sanity. I did not pause to draw the panel into place nor glance towards it as I closed the door behind me. Was I truly mad? I wondered. The Stephen who had peered at me from the gloom wore British flying garb which long ago I had laid aside. On stumbling feet I gained Mandrake House, gained Peter's pantry, swilled a lusty potion into my empty belly, and a second and a third, and mayhap more than that, and then drunkenly crawling on hands and knees went up the long stair, gibbering the everlasting quip of Yankee flying men, "Now I've seen everything."

Holding to the wall I wavered the corridor's length to lie sodden on my bed, nor did my coming rouse Mistress Dottie, slumbering at the foot. All that day I slept, wakening at twilight to remembrance of the misty image peering at me from beneath the fairy light. As well as may be I hastily thrust such thought from me and went to lave my vastly aching head. Thereafter, washed, cleaned and garbed, I found myself whistling cheerfully enough, I who scant hours before had feared to lay a razor to my jaw lest I be tempted to cut my throat. To my ears came homely sound of Jacob everlastingly replenishing the hearths, to my nostrils heartening odours. The bedchamber was again orderly, and as well as might be the corridor also, the debris of Caroline's chamber shut behind the door.

Belowstairs little remained to show the night's conflict, save the marred table and the painting of Stephen's dogs fled from the gilded frame over the corridor manteltree. Though from that day to this I have sought everywhere for the picture I have not come upon it, and I have no more answer for this mystery than have I for many an one known in Mandrake House.

In time Peter served my dinner, and I ate as hungrily as if I had not beheld my own image wavering before me in the darkness. The clock struck nine . . . ten . . . eleven, as I did a thousand mundane things to reassure Stephen Mandrake he was of wholesome state of mind and the grinning image was chimera and not portent of early death. I smoked my pipe and read a book, blew a blast upon my nose and sauntered to gaze upon the Mandrake dames hanging smugly on Mandrake walls, at painted men peering down from the panelling of the library.

Then came Peter, asking humbly enough that I follow him and I



did, followed him to the north addition, to Ellen's chamber. Again the wall rolled back at finger's touch and Peter went before me into the darkness. Above my head a lamp lighted, and another and another. Then I too ascended until I stood in a long broad chamber, its tinted walls agleam with lamplight.

As in the chamber below, from floor to ceiling books lined the gaily painted shelves. There was sheen of burnished chest and table and chair, lustre of silver, brave array of ornaments. A deep wide hearth, curtained window, a bed draped in costly silks. Peter beckoning me near, I beheld a woman strangely familiar, a woman who was dead. Beside the bed Ellen knelt, her head cradled in her arms, and it was she who answered my mute question. "Madam Mandrake, sir," she said quietly. And stupidly I repeated, "Madam Mandrake? *What* Madame Mandrake?" Ellen, touching the folded hands, answered me. "Sarah Mandrake," she said and fell a-weeping, the same woeful weeping which hours before had awakened me. I felt my own eyes sting. Never in my life had I been so bemuddled, so confused. Long months ago Sarah Mandrake had kept a self-appointed tryst with death, yet Sarah Mandrake newly sped lay before me.

In time I was to know the answer to the riddle, to behold fragments of Mandrake's puzzle fall slowly into place. Nor was the knowledge that a woman lay dead beneath the eaves the only startling thing the night brought forth. Peter going to the mantelshelf took from it a casket larger and more ornate than that which stood empty in my chamber. When he had thrust it into my hands I raised the lid and beheld a thousand shifting, shimmering lights. I did not need Peter's words to tell I grasped the casket holding Sarah Mandrake's missing jewels. I bade him carry them below, and for a little stood with Ellen beside the wasted body. Had Sarah Mandrake died as she had wished to die, I would have known of her only what she had wished me to know, but God decreed it otherwise. So it was that I whom she had chosen to live after her in Mandrake House looked upon her face in death and I have no shame to write I wept as I pressed my lips to her cold cheek, and went away leaving the strange woman to her mystery.

For all her canny preparation of deception Sarah Mandrake could not bear to part from the jewels she loved, and unwittingly overlooking the governmental receipt had borne them with her to her hideaway, bidding Peter when she was dead to replace one casket with an-

other and thereafter hold his peace. And this scheme also had gone awry.

Sarah Mandrake had died in the dawn of a bitter winter day, and another and another had fled, and I could find no answer to the problem with which she no longer had concern, the problem of her burial. Carefully she had made design for both her living and her death, sure that having beheld another Stephen master of Mandrake House she would die speedily and die happily. But she had not died and now the task she had set for Peter was impossible of his lone accomplishment. She had bidden him to wrap her dead body in the covering of her bed, bear it to the thicket on Mandrake's cliff with his own hands and secretly bury her. But now the thicket was sheathed in snow and the earth beneath, solid earth.

At last Mandrake was at peace, but I was not. Restlessly I contrived and discarded plan after plan, how make a grave in frozen ground without exposing Sarah Mandrake's fantastic death, how bury her poor body; or mayhap how convince the law that for months on end all unwittingly I had dwelt beneath the same roof with one whose fortune had already been made mine. Out of the chaos of thoughts came conviction if ever Mandrake's secret became known Van Etten's constabulary would descend upon me and with gusto see to it that forever I rotted in a felon's cell or to their delight dangled from a hangman's noose.

There were times when I considered sealing the chamber under the eaves and letting Sarah Mandrake forever rest on her silken bed, rest until the silk was tattered shreds, her flesh dust, her bones bleached and brittle relics of what had once been lovely woman. But this I could not do. Never would I forget the lonely chamber under the eaves sheltering the lonely dead—and there were scavenger rats among its rafters.

A second night I tossed and tumbled until my bed became unbearable. I rose and went restlessly down the long stair and, stirring the library fire to a blaze, sat peering at the painted men, wondering how well or how ill they would have dealt with such tangled skein as mine. A faint, flickering light crept up the wall until the room was bright as day, but I did not cower nor shrink in fear, for in my heart I knew never again would these walls tremble, nor pale wraiths whine, nor phantom footsteps trace my own.

The light grew amber-red. Still I was not frightened, but went to

stand before the window, and then it was borne upon me Mandrake Wood was afire. Drenched by winter, blanketed in snow, yet it was burning, and perhaps the showering embers might leap the distance to Mandrake House and lick it with greedy tongues. With all my strength I shouted. Peter came, and Jacob and I sped, one to rouse the stablemen, the other to ring through to Van Etten asking for help. Suppose Mandrake went down in flames and Sarah Mandrake's tiny bones were found among the ash. What price Stephen Mandrake's liberty? What price his very life?

Within the hour the incendiary cart screamed up the lane, and many men came, labouring valiantly until the burning copse was quenched and the ancient trees made safe. That was Mandrake's last miracle. The thicket was freed of frost, and before another dawn with Peter I dug a grave in its thawed earth. Wrapping the poor body in the silken sheath of the bed, in my arms I bore it down one stair and another to lie on Peter's hastily wrought litter. Then we went silently to the waiting grave, and under fading winter stars committed to earth that which in life had been known as Sarah Mandrake.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ONE by one I lifted trays from the ornate casket and in glittering array spread their contents on the writing table. It was long enough before I checked Sarah Mandrake's jewels with governmental listing. In a deep aperture beneath the trays I came upon a packet bearing my own name, and when I'd broken the seal sat for hours reading and reading again the many closely written pages wherein the strange woman had set down the incredible story of Mandrake House. When I had done I locked the casket in my writing table and rang through to Benjamin Froste, bidding him come quickly to Mandrake. On the day following he arrived.

That night I sat again with him before the library hearth, the jewel case on a table at my elbow. Peering at it curiously, Froste asked, "What is that, Steve?"

"I'll show you directly, but first I have a tale to tell."

"More trouble?"

"No," I told him. "I think our trouble is done with forever. Benjamin," I began, "two nights ago I buried Sarah Mandrake."

He arose hastily, backed towards the door and laid hand to the pull of Peter's bell. So plain was his alarm I grinned. "Don't ring," I told him. "I'm altogether sane and harmless."

"The hell you are!" he said but loosed the bell-pull and peered at me curiously. "What do you mean by saying you buried Sarah Mandrake two nights ago?"

"She didn't drown herself. She died in the attic of the north addition."

Benjamin mopped his brow with an unsteady hand. "Maybe you are not crazy, Steve," he said pitifully. "Maybe it's me."

"Neither you nor me, Benjamin," I assured him. "Sit down." He did and I told him of Sarah Mandrake's belated passing, of her grave hidden among the rowans, of my share in laying her within it. Then I opened the casket and, when the dazed man had peered at its content, I drew forth the packet, gave it to him and left him to read as I had read.

It was Benjamin's thought that those few whose names were written into it again and again also should know what Sarah Mandrake in the last days of her life had painstakingly set down. So it was that on a blustery March night six persons who once before had assembled in Mandrake's library assembled there again—Froste and Barry Van-ningham, Peter Petralsky and his wife Ellen, her head no longer distorted by the grotesque cap, since the dead eyes of the woman for whose approval she had worn it could no longer behold. Jacob Schultz was there also, and I, Stephen Ellers-Mandrake, who would make known to them the drama in which each wittingly or unwittingly had played a part.

I sat with the packet open upon my knee while Froste solemnly explained to those assembled the nature of a felony, warning them if they kept their peace concerning what was about to be imparted to them they grievously contributed to such thing, and then demanded of them sworn oath that so long as they drew breath of life they would keep the secret of Mandrake House. When they had so sworn, I made beginning of the tale to which Sarah Mandrake had set hand and effort on the day she became a self-condemned prisoner in the house which for her own purpose she had restored to life.

"My dear Stephen," she had written: "Today is the thirty-first of October. The Feast of All Souls, a day set apart and dedicated by ancient churchmen to honor all law-abiding passengers on Charon's Ferry, and to me it seems both comic and pathetic that even among the moldering dead are those considered to be of phantasmagorical nobility. On this day, my dear Stephen, to all intents and purposes I have died. Tomorrow, the next day or a week hence, intricate machinery of my creation will set in motion the wheels which will draw you to Mandrake House, I in my eyrie among the eaves shall see another Stephen master of Mandrake, and then I shall die content.

"The gentleman of the somber cloak and sinister scythe has long been my companion. He came to live with me on a dreary day in

Paris when, stunned and incredulous, I sat in the consulting room of a physician and learned that, beyond all possible doubt, certain malicious seeds within my poor body would bud, flower and bear fruit, and when the fruit had ripened, I would die. I well remember on that day the road from the medical portal to my waiting motor under the sheltering umbrella of Peter Petralisky had all the horror of a promenade toward the sinister caress of Madame Guillotine. It is solemnly odd to consider that, on the funeral journey toward my dwelling, for the first time in many a long year I recalled nostalgically my own country, recalled it as with almost unseeing eyes I looked upon the rain-washed trees weeping their somber tears on the desolate metal tables of winter-abandoned garden cafés, recalled it as I huddled under the motor robes, wondering if even at that very moment death stalked me, and never again would I see the lights of Paris streets glimmering under their halos of smoky mist.

"Perhaps it was no more than instinct of an ailing beast which turned my heart again toward the place of my beginning, or perhaps both my flight from Mandrake and my return to it were destined when I was embryonic in my mother's womb. I think in the days which followed the verdict of death I went altogether mad, wandering disconsolately throughout my house, regarding it anew, or from one window or another looking upon vistas I had looked upon many a day of my life and had never seen at all. I pray God neither you nor yours may ever know such horror as I endured for days and weeks and months.

"Never before had I been inclined toward introspection or balancing one fact against another. Euphrosyne rather than Niobe had accompanied me all my life, and never had I contemplated my own death. Now indeed I *must* contemplate it, must decide if I had fortitude to live apart from my familiars, without excuse, or admitting the devastating evil which had come upon me, recognize pity or disgust in eyes that had hitherto looked upon me with admiration or even with envy. I was the legendary Sari Mandrake. Life had withheld few of its gifts from me. Fame had been mine in plenty, and I possessed almost fabulous wealth. I had been courted, loved, envied, admired, sought for. I had been proud beyond pride, and in the twinkling of an eye these things had become dross.

"I have written 'Sari Mandrake' or I might use the form chosen since I have returned to the United States, 'Sarah Mandrake,' for the

habits of more than half a lifetime are binding and it is difficult for me to remember I have no more right to the name than one has to a jewel found neglected and forgotten which, polished once again, is worn with pride. I am not Sarah Mandrake, nor have I ever been, though long ago I made the name mine, proudly because of love, defiantly because of hate, for 'Mandrake' has meant both to me. Less than a mile from this place in which presently I shall know the end of life are the ruins of the house in which I knew its beginning. My most definite memory of it was a gray hour between dawn and day. My father hunched over his food, his huge beard moving in rhythm to his munching, while my mother, dazed from a blow of his heavy hand, sought ineffectually to staunch blood and tears with a corner of her apron. There has never been an hour of my life when I could not vividly recall the dreadful sound of her sobbing indrawn breath. I was born Klara Schultz, born in a bright pink clapboard house whose crimson shutters were like drops of blood among the green of its shading trees, born on a bitter winter day to Anna my mother, and there have been hours of my life when I considered it would be well indeed had I not been born at all."

For a moment I faltered and raised commiserating eyes to Jacob, huddled over the fire, his hands dangling between his knees. Jacob, without turning from the hearth, said quietly, "The first time I clapped eyes on her I knew she was my sister Klara, knew it before that, I guess. Sounds kinda crazy, doesn't it? She'd been gone fifty years or so. No one ever heard of her since the day she beat it, an' lots of folks hereabouts thought the old man did away with her. But I knew she wasn't dead. My old lady was dead an' the old man down in the asylum at Poughkeepsie, an' there wasn't anything to keep me hanging around.

"I lit out right after Klara run off. Went to sea, I did, an' when war came along I got me a piece of that. Then I started working at race tracks. Along about 1930 got me a job with the Rosecrans stable. A coupla years later I was boss man round here—good job, good money an' I was doing all right.

"We was running at Jamaica when I seed a picture of a dame in the paper an' there was a piece about her buying the old Mandrake place up in Dutchess County an' goin' to live there. There wasn't anyone in the world knowed the Mandrake place or the Mandrake

family better'n me. As fur as I knew there warn't any of them living, an' I begun wondering who the hell this-here Sarah Mandrake was. The picture looked like someone I remembered all right but it didn't look like no Mandrakes that I ever saw.

"Well, I tore out that picture an' stuck it in my pocket, an' I usta keep takin' it out an' lookin' at it, an' then one day it struck me all of a heap the dame was my sister Klara. Maybe I was nuts but I was goin' to find out if I was or not. I asked the boss could I git off a coupla days, an' then I come up here to Van Etten an' took a gander at this-here Madam Mandrake. Right away, sure as shootin' I knew it was Klara.

"I never did go back to Rosecrans'. I wrote the boss a letter an' told him I was quittin' because I was took sick, an' then I went around an' asked this Madam Mandrake, like she called herself, for a job. She'd changed a lot but I'd have known the way her mouth twisted up when she laughed. She usta laugh a lot when she was a kid. She'd throw back her head an' twist her mouth on the side, an' laugh like a good fella. She didn't have much to laugh about, either. My old man was a stinker to us kids. Maybe not to Karl, because he was scared of Karl. I guess he was rottener to Klara than to any of us. She was a spunky little kid an' she never would give in to him. He was the dominie of a cock-eyed religion. "The Jehovian Brotherhood," they called themselves, an' they believed devils and such-like got into folks.

"A coupla times a year they'd have a big devil-castin'-out, kinda like 'spring an' fall housecleaning, or maybe a good dose of salts. I usta have my devils cast out regular. Didn't do no good, though. I grew me a new crop right off, but if I didn't go to the castin'-out the old man'd beat the hell outta me. We all hadda show up. That is, Sophy an' Karl an' me an' Klara. Henny, the oldest kid, ran off when he was long 'bout sixteen or so. Sophy an' Karl took the meetings serious, but Klara an' me usta go for the hell of it. When they was havin' their devils cast out the folks usta jump around crazy-like, tearin' their clothes an' foammin' at the mouth an' yellin' like hell. Well, no one jumped up any higher nor yelled any louder than Klara an' me. Usta pick out folks we didn't like an' scream in their ears and jump on their feet. I guess all the Jehovians were nuts. I know my old man was, but no one ever caught onto him till my old lady died.

"Well, as I say, when I saw this Madam Mandrake I named myself

an' watched her pretty close, but she never batted an eye, told me to go see the guy that was fixin' up the grounds.

"I did, an' he put me to work. After the house was fixed an' Klara came out here to live I usta hang around her all I could, but I never did let on I knew who she was. If that was the way she wanted it, it was O.K. by me. And at that I guess these last coupla years was the best I ever had in my life. It was like when Klara usta hang around me talkin' an' kinda chucklin'. I sure liked the little old kid. She was my twin, but she was such a runt I kinda got out of the habit of thinkin' she was the same age. She had a head on her, though. After the old man quit workin' the farm it was pretty much Klara who kept things goin'.

"Well, last fall when she was supposed to have done away with herself I couldn't figger it thataway. It didn't make sense for someone as well fixed as Klara to kill herself, and I kinda suspicioned Pete here, an' maybe Ellie, had something to do with her dyin'. Then Mr. Mandrake showed up an' told me Klara left me a wad of money and a house. When I found out Pete and Ellie didn't get no more money than me, an' not as much house, I stopped thinkin' they did away with her.

"Well, after I got the money I lit out an' got drunk—stayed drunk for a week—an' by golly, the feelin' I usta have about Klara bein' livin' got inside me agin, an' I sobered up an' came back here in a hurry. It was goofy to think she was shut up in the house, but I was sure as shootin' she was around somewhere. Took to watching Pete and Ellie like a hawk, but I never did dope out where Klara was till a coupla weeks back. Then I figgered out mebbe she was in one of the garrets, tried the south addition first because that's where she lived when she first come here, went over every inch of the big house too. That's what I was doin' when you found me crawlin' around this-here room on my belly, Mr. Mandrake. I was lookin' for where Klara was hid.

"Remember the night you hollered there was a shadder on the ground? I was the shadder. There wasn't no lights showing in the house an' I thought you folks was in bed. I shoved a ladder up against the tree an' clumb a limb onto the roof for a peek into them false winders. Only way I could get a peek, because Peter wouldn't let anybody in his part of the house. First off I couldn't see a thing, then I found a little place where I could kinda see

under the curtain an' there was Klara in bed, an' she was laughin' an' Ellie was readin' outta a book. I thought everything might be O.K., but I didn't know what the hell to make out of it.

"I was still a-peekin' through the winda when the Doc's car came along and the lights picked me up. I tell you I scrambled off'n that roof in nothin' flat, got down the ladder and shoved it up in the tree so's nobody'd see it in case they came lookin', then I beat it round to the back door and was halfway up the stairs when I met Dottie a-comin' down. She said the boss was hollering f'r me, an' she'd told him I was taking a bath. Sounds kinda silly excuse in the middle of winter, but I didn't say so an' went on in, an', boss, you said you wanted me to help hunt a burglar. I didn't ketch on at first that I was the burglar you was talkin' about, so I got my gun an' went on outside. Remember when the ladder conked me, boss? My Gawd, was I scared! Thought sure 's hell a spook 'd laid holt o' me. I didn't take no time to fix the ladder good up that tree but that warn't no 'scuse f'r fergettin' 'bout it intire."

As I recalled Jacob's scrawny neck gyved by the rungs I laughed. "Very well indeed, Jacob," I said. "And from this distance it's undoubtedly humorous, but at that time it really wasn't at all. In fact you might have been done in."

"Who? Me?" asked Jacob. "Hell, no, you can't kill me. I'm immoral."

For a breath there was astonished silence, then Vanningham drawled, "Aren't we all? But why bring it out in the open, Jake?"

"Well," said Jacob, "I figger if a guy's had as many narrer escapes as I had an' come out all of a piece he's got a right to brag on it."

Light dawned. "Oh," said Froste pedantically, "you mean 'immortal,' Jake."

"Sure I mean immoral," said Jacob truculently. "Didn't I just say so?"

Vanningham laughed. "O.K., Jake, you're immoral. We'll leave it at that. So it was you that was on the roof that night. Cripes, what a mess you got me into! I took a short cut between Scarletville and the highway and at the top of Feddows Hill my lights were about even with Mandrake's roof, and darned if they didn't pick up someone skulking around the dormers. I thought sure it was Hazeltine."

"Hazeltine?" I questioned. "Who is Hazeltine?"

Vanningham grinned and peered intently at Jacob, and Jacob an-

swered ambiguously, "Right now he ain't nobody. F'r a spell he was a crazy guy what made a parcel of trouble f'r a lot of folks." He did not enlarge further on the subject and after a bit of quiet Vanningham resumed his narration.

"I backed the car into the bushes and came on over. I guess I must have got here after the ladder business, although I did hear Jake yelling and I ran right into him and Steve playing cops and robbers. I played too. Once Jake came limping around a corner, going like hell, and I had to back up against the hedge and play like I was a bush.

"When Steve started up the hill it didn't occur to me he'd find the car, but after he doubled back and yelled I took a short cut to head them off, but didn't make it, and all the while Jake was fiddling around starting it I was right back there in the bushes cursing the hell out of him. Had to tramp all the way to Scarletville. Didn't find out the wallet was missing until I began undressing and then I didn't know what the devil to do. It was my sister Prue's money. She'd got a fool hunch there was going to be a depression or something, and began mousing out her money in bureau drawers and old stockings and things. She had twelve thousand or so in cash. When I found out about it I took it away from her and was going to stick it in the National at Albany, but the day I went up there I ran across the Cadillac and it was such a good buy I shot some of Prue's dough for it. If she wanted the car, O.K. If she didn't, I'd take it off her hands. By the time the deal was through the bank was closed, so I left my own car to be overhauled and came on home. I couldn't peep about losing the wallet or I'd have a hysterical female on my hands. Made up my mind not to say anything about losing it and maybe it would show up. I have a lot of contacts around, and I knew darn well if some guy started flashing thousand-dollar bills there'd be talk; besides, I'd been smart enough to take the numerals down, notified banks from hell to breakfast. I was pretty sure I'd hear something, but in the meantime I just didn't want Prudence to find out I'd been dumb enough to lose her money.

"I got a damned good laugh out of Steve being all polite and suspicious-like about the business, but I thought he had enough on his mind without bothering him about Hazeltine hanging round, and anyhow it was a pretty good joke to keep him guessing. Maybe I wasn't right bright at the time. Sorry, Steve; didn't mean to hold up your reading."

But Jacob had not yet done.

"Up to now I couldn't make out why Klara wanted to hide herself away like that," he said. "But this time I know she's dead for sure. The night we had the big ruckus I was a-settin' on Mr. Mandrake's bed hushin' up Dottie and all of a sudden I gotta hunch Klara was dead. I even know where she's buried. I kept right on snoopin' an' heard Pete tell the boss he couldn't get to dig no grave up there on the cliff because the ground was too froze, an' some way I knowed he was talkin' about buryin' Klara. I knew the boss was O.K., and if he was fixin' to do that way I got to thinkin' how I could help him. That night I went over an' tore off some board from Pa's old house an' built up a big pile of 'em right in the middle of the bushes, an' when it got late enough, drug up a couple or three cans of furnace oil an' soaked everything pretty good. Then I lit up the fire an' let her rip.

"When you was a-buryin' Klara I stood off behind a tree an' heard the boss prayin' an' Pete here cryin' out loud. I guess I prayed an' cried some myself. I sure felt like it.

"Excuse me, Mr. Mandrake. I didn't go for to hold up the readin', neither. I just had to get a coupla things off my chest."

Again I began Sarah Mandrake's incredible story.

"I have lived a long life," she wrote, "and countless momentous events have occurred in it. Many are dim and obscured. Doubtless many are altogether forgotten. But very well do I recall the trifling and inconsequential happenings of my very young years. The lovely sinuous movement of spotted pickerel as they nibbled the water reeds on a bright summer day when I was no more than eight years old; the wonder of coming suddenly upon a wilderness of purple flowers blooming in the sun-blasted shale of an abandoned railroad bed; my utter grief at tearing the heel from my only pair of shoes in the rough flooring of a country dance hall. Verily since I have come to this secret room the days of my beginning have unfolded little by little, as one unfolds a fan, and I am regretful that I did not deal more wisely with the evil that came to me. Indeed I did not deal with it at all, but fled frantically away.

"In this day and age it is quite impossible to describe such a man as my father, Herman Schultz—a man of God in his own conceit, but to me a relentless taskmaster, a ruthless disciplinarian—and at times the very Devil himself.

"I did not like Herman Schultz, who rose before dawn to shout his Jehovian behest at the very heavens; who prayed so ardently and long over our noontime food that to avoid punishment for tardiness his children with half-filled bellies had to scamper like frightened cottontails back to the village school; who nightly, by light of a lamp throwing his bearded head in a monstrous silhouette on the wall, so angrily roared words of Holy Writ that with strange Biblical terms ringing in my ears I crept fearfully to bed, terrified that God himself—or at least a patriarch or a prophet—waited in the dark hallway to fall upon me and punish me for my daily sins.

"For sin there always was. Strive as I might against it, sin forever dogged my footsteps, and in unwary moments sprang upon me—the dreadful sin of leaving the cake of homemade soap to dissolve in the tin basin where I scrubbed my grimy little paws; the obscenity of failing to cover my small stool with lime from the bucket standing in the corner of the family outhouse; my heinously wandering wits as Herman furiously besought his God to bless our daily bread. Even as I feared and disliked Herman Schultz, so in time I came to fear and dislike the dreadful God he served—a God who seemed to me a larger and blacker-bearded replica of Herman himself. The only difference I could discern between my earthly father and my Heavenly Father was that the earthly one had concrete form which I might skillfully avoid, while the Heavenly one, also confusedly known as Jehovah, God-of-wrath, Messiah and Redeemer, was an unseen and ever-present spy upon my wrongdoings. I was early convinced the Heavenly Father told the earthly one of all my sins and permitted him to deal with me accordingly.

"Why my mother married my father, or continued to endure her life with him I do not know. By birth and breeding she was his superior, and at heart a gentle and timid woman, but neither gentleness nor timidity was permitted the wife of holy Herman Schultz if she or her brood were to have a roof over their heads, food in their bellies, clothes on their backs. The God Herman served was a hungry God, and had not my mother steeled her will against it his earned dollars would have been poured into the coffers of the Jehovian Brotherhood and his family left to shift for themselves. When she no longer had hardihood to oppose him, the Brotherhood opened its greedy maw and swallowed everything which Herman Schultz possessed.

"I am writing these things to you, Stephen, that you may know

the seed and soil from which I sprang, and judge me on that basis; know the small Klara who, Sunday after Sunday, on backless wooden benches sat with small fellow Jehovahians and through long hours of the afternoon battled valiantly against the Devil. From a grimy Bible cupped into his great palm my father shouted fearful and confusing words. Little Jehovahians often used to howl dismally and be led forth, spraddle-legged, dripping water down their cotton-stockinged legs into their Sunday buttoned shoes. But I, well used to my father's shouting, knew the moment to clap my hands and shout, 'Amen! Amen! Bless the Lord, brethren! Bless the Lord!' and so be free to sit daydreaming, watching the organ keys move under Stella Hazeltine's flaccid hands, her corseted body sway above her hips, the sun glitter on combs in her hair, while I wondered if the sparkling colored glass were not a part of the Heaven which I had renounced. Secretly I was no longer a child of God but forever dedicated to his enemy the Devil.

"I think I was about seven years old when I became convinced it was impossible to please my father's angry God, and hook, line and sinker, had gone over to the Prince of Darkness. Such was my depravity I would have gladly traded my hope of a future snowy robe for a present red silk dress. When I thought of my father shorn of earthly body and beard, clad in a trailing gown and very possibly tootling a golden horn, it reduced me to helpless snickering not always successfully concealed by the palms held tightly over my unruly mouth.

"Nor could I think of Stella Hazeltine as handmaiden to the Lord, for to me His handmaidens were more akin to the pretty waitresses at Van Etten's inn, clad in ox-blood chambray, collared, cuffed and aproned in snowy dotted swiss, than ever they were to Stella in her sweaty varicolored Sunday silk. Nor could I understand why my father addressed her in such exalted terms. To me she was no 'sister-in-grace,' no 'Vestal Virgin,' no 'daughter of Jehovah.' She was a horrid woman who smelled too much of sweat. I hated the sausage-like arm in its tight sleeve which she was forever throwing about my shoulders, hated her loose lips, her all-too-frequent kisses, hated her clownish idiot son Victor, whom we were told to love and suffer as one of the Lord's dear afflicted. Nevertheless I did not at all love Victor, and had not a hazy idea how I was to suffer him. I took no part in the endless pranks played on him, nor in the teasing mockery

of small Jehovahs when they came upon the loutish boy hidden in some dim corner of church or Sunday-school room.

"Search memory as I will I cannot recall a single helpful thing taught to me by my teacher in the Jehovahian Sunday school—nothing at all save a jumble of ideas which made the Promised Land my father was forever shouting about a cross between the city of Poughkeepsie and Mandrake Estate, embodying the better attributes of each. I had little doubt when good Jehovahs died, to them the street between the railroad station and Lucky Platt's unbelievable store would become a glittering golden highway, and Lucky's would no longer demand money for Scots-plaid ribbons, red silk dresses and feather-laden hats; nor for the candy which lay in handsomely colored trays behind a glass case; nor for tall bottles of lilac cologne capped in smooth white kid and tied beautifully with bows of violent-colored ribbon.

"These things were not for poor sinful Klara Schultz, who profaned the Sabbath by stealthy, solitary games of jackstones, who offended against the mysterious thing called modesty by weighting her small obscene drawers with a stone, hanging her sinful petticoats on a bush and, in the manner of an energetic tadpole, swimming bare-naked in a river inlet, while Jacob in similar state of nakedness and sin splashed beside her, hidden by trailing fronds of a willow tree.

"So this Klara despite the Biblical command to love her neighbor, fled from gibbering Victor Hazeltine and from Stella his mother, laborer in the vineyard though she was."

At this point Jacob hawed his throat for attention and when I raised questioning eyes, said, "Kin I stick my oar in fr a minit, boss?" I nodded and he began.

"Ya asked awhile back who was this Hazeltine guy. Well, I'll tell ya. His ma's folks had the farm right next ours. Stell was the only kid they had. They was Jehovahs too, thick as hell with Pa. Stell warn't a bad looker and all to once there was talk about her and Pa, then she lit out and when she come back she had this kid Victor and let on she'd got married an' her husband 'd died off on her. Called herself Miz something or other but folk aroun' went right on callin' her Stell Hazeltine. Then her pa and ma passed on and someways or other she began being called Miz Hazeltine. After a while she got to be a high-up Jehovahian too. There was them that let on she told them

her kid belonged to Pa. I never did know f'r sure. Never cared neither.

"Well, this Victor grew up without a lick of sense. If ya riled him up he was a nasty customer all right, but in the main he was a harmless cuss. But you do something mean to him and he'd pay ya back if it took a thousand years. I don't much know what happened to the Hazeltines when I was away but when I come back Stell 'd passed on and ol' Vic 'd took up with a tramp woman and was livin' with her in his ma's cellar. The rest of the house was stove in. First time he seed me he knew me all right an' after that he'd come moochin' aroun' f'r a handout. Then he had a ruckus with Peter here and began frettin' Miz Mandrake—funny I keep right on thinkin' of her as Miz Mandrake when I know good and well she was Klara—well anyhow, ol' Vic got so rambunctious Miz Mandrake was skeered he'd do a harm to her or mebbe to Pete so she had him carted off to the 'sylum and no more'n a coupla weeks he'd broke out and was right back on his ma's old place, but he kinda kep' out of notice. Tell ya some more about the cuss later."

I lowered my eyes to the paper and read Sarah Mandrake's next entry. "*December 28,*" she wrote:

"Since my world has narrowed to this room it is strange to consider what infinitesimal matters interest and amuse me: the glow of firelight reflected on the brass knobs of my chest of drawers; the flickering shadows of flame on walls and ceiling, shadows in which I trace resemblance to those whose lives long ago marched with my own, the saturnine face of Harry Phillips, the stubby features of Sophia my sister, my mother's lovely profile, the gross silhouette of Herman's bearded head, my brother Karl whom I hated, and Caroline Phillips whom I also hated, Heinrich, the scarce-remembered elder brother, and Jacob my twin whom wholeheartedly I love. Indeed I have come to believe in the long years of my life I have truly loved but two persons, my brother Jacob and Stephen Mandrake.

"*December 30th:* Today Benjamin Froste came to Mandrake, and by chicanery and guile Peter lured him to the north addition. Sitting at ease beside the hearth, I heard him in the room below tell Ellen that Stephen Ellers had arrived from Lisbon on the twenty-second, that his injury is giving trouble and for the present at least he will be

hospitalized. As I had expected he would come directly to Mandrake, I have seen to it that Peter maintained a proper staff, and now we are both uncertain what to do next. Whatever happens I have vowed to live until with my own eyes I have seen another Stephen master of Mandrake House. I still have strength to move freely about the north addition, and I am safe enough from discovery. Peter and Ellen are careful and thorough, and no one save themselves ever is permitted to pass the threshold.

"Do you believe the dead return, Stephen? Had such a question been asked me a scant decade ago, I would have been amused at its absurdity or annoyed at its stupidity. I believed then in nothing beyond life, and Heaven and Hell were to me only bogeys begotten by churchmen to mystify the timid souls of the world. Yet tonight Stephen Mandrake sits beside my hearth in the tweed coat which he so often wore as he sat with me before the hearth of the stone cottage just within Mandrake Gate—Stephen with whom I fell in love when I was five years old and never ceased to love. Do I appear mad, Stephen Ellers? Perhaps I have become mad. Surely there was a taint in my blood. My father's feverish dalliance with his God was madness; the child he had begotten of Stella Hazeltine was an idiot; my mother's withdrawal from life was madness too; frustrated Sophie waiting for the bridegroom who never came was mad; Karl was criminally so; Heinrich was a weakling with little wit and no stability. Of all of Anna's children only Jacob went his sane way and stubbornly lived his life according to his own will.

"But always I was a violent child, and dealt with others as I myself had been dealt with. If I were beaten, I bore the blows stoically, but then meted out punishment upon everything weaker than I that I could lay hand on. If, justly or unjustly, I were deprived of a treasure, I set about replacing it with another, and it mattered little if I must commit a theft to do so. Mandrake was a treasure trove. With industrious stealth I uprooted flowers from gardens and borders and ran to plant them in my own secret and hidden garden, lifted collars from the kennel racks to buckle about my small belly, and like a human magpie seized anything I could find and carried it off with me.

"Only once did my stealing bring disaster. Finding a lovely ruffled parasol on Mandrake lawn, I fled with it, and for days afterward strutted proudly in places where I was certain I would not be seen. Then, alas, one day a lusty wind blew my skinny little self, still cling-

ing to the impromptu parachute, over the cliff and, as I sat bruised and furious among the weeds, tore it from me, and, well beyond reach, I saw my stolen treasure slowly floating down the river.

"So far as he could, Jacob hindered my continued filching, but when in his sixth year he was permitted to attend school and I was not, all restraint was removed and I stole everything I could lay hand on. One morning my father beat me soundly. I do not remember my crime, but I do remember I fled from him and in a secret hiding place lay weeping and pulling angrily at the grass. To repay me for my beating I made up my mind to do something. I had thought about for a long time—steal one of the larger kennels from Mandrake runs. With tears still pouring down my face I arose and galloped up Mandrake Lane—into the knees of Stephen. I like to remember that he did not question me, said not a word, but led me to the stableyard and horse trough, washed my dirty little face and hands and dried them with his elegant handkerchief.

"In that moment I fell in love with Stephen. I did not at all know his identity, nor did I care to know it. He was clearly an understanding soul, and suddenly I decided to include him in my project of kennel-stealing. When he understood what I was about, he wholeheartedly offered his assistance. It was Stephen who forced the cumbersome kennel through the enclosure gate, with my able help pushed it to the ground sloping downward to the cliff's edge and sent it tumbling end over end until it came to rest in the thicket beside the cliff.

"Hand in hand we raced after it and together set it upright. So began the friendship between Stephen Mandrake, whose years numbered beyond thirty, and a little girl of five. Until my small behind grew too large to back through the opening, the stolen kennel was my covert, the one place in the world truly mine. I fled there to weep angry or mournful tears, to gloat over stolen trinkets, to play with the lovely china doll Stephen had given me or, when the chilly days of autumn came, wrapped in the plush robe adroitly pilfered from Mandrake stables, lay with chin pillowed on my hands. I must have looked like a gigantic, contemplative caterpillar.

"Often Stephen came to smoke his pipe beside me or, resting a book against his updrawn knees, he would read tales of stolen princesses, of fair and gallant knights, of sorceries and enchantments, of water babies and elves, of Guinevere and Merlin. In time they, with

Arthur and his knights, Titania and her court, became so familiar that if one of them had appeared I would not have been surprised but in fellowship offered a corner of my robe or a bite of my apple.

"In the same place Stephen read to me meatier tales of Dickens and Scott, George Eliot and Shakespeare. I remember the utter amazement of my sixth-grade teacher when apropos of nothing at all I rose and recited long passages from *Hamlet*, becoming in turn the Ghost, the gloomy Dane himself, Ophelia and the Queen. I was not yet eight years old when, word for word, I knew *The Tempest* and *Romeo and Juliet*. There were times when I truly did not know whether I were Bottom, Caliban, Juliet, Lady Macbeth, or Klara Schultz. Much of what Stephen read I understood very well, some very little. But I loved it all, as I loved the sound of his voice. At times Stephen himself was the Black Knight, or Lancelot breaking a lance for his lady's favor. Always small Klara smugly made herself Rowena or Guinevere sitting among her maidens, and as an added enchantment I saw her treating them from a box of very modern chocolates.

"I was eight when Stephen discovered my voice. The stone cottage at the end of Mandrake Lane was built to house the first Stephen when Mandrake was building. His overseer John Faulkner had lived in it, and in turn his children and his grandchildren, and many years after the last Faulkner had dwelt there it was still known as the Faulkner house. From it Stephen had built a runway down to the dock where his boats were anchored. By chain and winch they were drawn up the slope to rest on trestles in the cellar during the winter. Upstairs were cases of oil-glistening guns, shelves of painted decoys, racks of fishing rods, coils of silk and catgut lines, and case after case of lures for both river fish and the more canny denizens of Berkshire streams. Golf clubs rested on wooden racks, tennis rackets in their presses, and above the chimney piece were the wooden pegs which in the old days had held John Faulkner's long-stemmed pipes.

"There was a wide, deep hearth. Beside it bookshelves stretched from the floor to the leaded casement windows, but the books and shelving dated only from Stephen's day; the Faulkner clan were men of deeds, not of books. Bright rugs dotted a puncheon worn smooth by the feet of generations, and curtains of crimson rep hung at the windows and doors. Often enough I have slept in the palace of a king and I've forgotten it, lived among priceless treasures of rich

men and forgotten them also, but never have I altogether forgotten a field-stone cottage at the end of a country lane.

"There was a great piano standing squarely in the very middle of the room. To me this was an amazing thing, for all the pianos I had ever seen were of shiny varnished wood, ugly and high, pushed flat against a wall and forbidden to the touch of dirty little fingers. Blissful to come upon a piano which might be explored from all sides, whose surface did not retain the mark of grimy paws, whose lid might be raised in such a way that a little girl kneeling on a chair beside it could see the movement of the wires as Stephen Mandrake touched the keys! It was an enchanted place, that cottage, enchanted indeed to the little girl whose life was shorn of beauty by her father's unwholesome creed.

"In time, perched on the bench beside Stephen, I learned to play scales, chords and tinkling little tunes. For beautiful years the cottage was more my home than the ugly pink clapboard house of Herman Schultz. There was a secret way by which Stephen taught me to open the wide door of the boat cellar. When I felt a need of the lovely room I crept through the cellar, groped in the twilight for the stairs, thrust the door in the floor upward and, closing it behind me, found an always changing world. At times Stephen was there before me. At other times he came later, but often enough I lay on my stomach before the hearth, content and alone, reading a book from the shelves. I learned many things in the stone cottage—to make a fire, to brew tea and serve it properly, to squat before the hearth and toast bread held on a pointed stick, to flip fried cakes expertly on a griddle, and other proud domesticities.

"In time Stephen taught me to play the piano, to ride a horse, bare-back or with a saddle, to ski, to skate, to sail his boats and to make use of the voice the gods had bestowed. Then suddenly, without a word of farewell, he went away and the bottom dropped out of my life. It was a confused and dreadful year. Not only did Stephen vanish, but my almost forgotten elder brother came up Mandrake Lane in a somber carriage. For terrifying days he lay cold and still in my father's house, before he was taken to Van Etten's churchyard, where he sleeps till Gabriel's horn sounds.

"Sophia, my sister, became ill with a mysterious illness that sent Herman time and again to her room to shout and stamp and blaspheme, and sent Anna farther into the shadows which began on the

day Heinrich in his sad wooden box came into her house. Then Sophia went away, and I saw her only once again. Jacob and I had gone with my mother on one of her rare excursions away from home, and on a street corner in Albany we came upon Sophia shaking a tambourine to the booming drum of a Salvation Army band. My mother had stood and stared, then laughed long and strangely, and she was laughing still when we led her up Mandrake Lane. Never again until the night I left that house did Anna Schultz set foot outside her own threshold."

Jacob rumbled in his throat and for a little I halted, waiting for what he had to say.

"Lots of ways I was older'n Klara, even if we was twins. I knew Sophy was goin' to have a kid, knew the night she had it, knew it was a girl, an' my old man fixed it up with Tod Scott to take it. When it grew up it married Tod's son Sam an' had a kid of her own called Sam too. Young Sam he married the Rider girl. Sam an' Gamaliel Scott are his grandchildren. But none of the Scotts amount to shucks." He spat reflectively into the fire, and I went on with my reading.

"According to my father," wrote Madam Mandrake, "Heinrich had sold himself to flesh and the Devil, Sophia had become a scarlet woman, neither Jacob nor I showed any inclination toward a godly life, and therefore Karl must embrace the Lord. So Karl, who had never completed the eighth grade in the Etten school, went to study at the ministerial hall of learning which produced anointed Jehovians, and the fact that he had no more inclination toward the ministry than a hound dog made little difference. Herman was determined his loins must produce one man of God, and Karl was equally determined not by the sweat of his brow to earn his bread, and into Karl's education his besotted parent poured every material thing he possessed."

Again Jacob interrupted. "I git to thinkin' sometimes what sorta folks we would have turned into if we had got some sorta decent raisin'. Heinrich could play the organ like all hell. He never took any kinda music lesson in his life, but he could make up songs an' sing 'em good, an' he wanted bad to be a musicker but the old man was sot

on him bein' a preacher. Well, they had a big fight, an' Henny run off. He ended up playin' for his likker in saloons. There wasn't nothin' bad 'bout Sophy either, only she wanted to git married. The old man said she hadda stay home an' raise chickens to help make a minister outta Karl. Wouldn't let a fella come nigh the house, so Sophy up an' got herself a woods colt. Did all right though; after a while she got to be boss of a place where the Salvation Army keeps indignant girls or somethin'. A big piece was printed about her in the paper when she died a while back.

"An' you take Karl. Could fix any machinery. Liked to do it, too. One time he made himself a kinda automobile what ran with kerosene. He wasn't such a bad fella till the old man got to working on him to be a preacher. Began lazin' up, he did. After a while got so he wouldn't do a damn thing. He was a smart guy all right, though. Did O.K. in the preachin' line till some guy shot him dead for monkeyin' around his daughter. . . . An' you take me now. I ain't braggin' but there ain't nothin' I can't do with animals. Like farmin' too, always did. Coulda made a good thing outta the old man's place, but, like I said, after my old lady died an' Klara run off I didn't want no part of it. That was 1890, the same year they hauled Pa off to the 'sylum. I lit out too. That was the time I got me the job on an ocean boat."

"Was that where you lost your leg, Jacob?" I asked.

"Hell, no," he said. "That was after I started workin' with the racin' folks. A mean gelding cornered me in a loose box and when he got through kickin' me there warn't enough left of my shinbone to make a good-sized toothpick. I don't know as why I keep a-stickin' my oar in, Mr. Mandrake. Tell me shut my trap, why don'tcha?"

And so I began again at a page dated January twenty-seventh.

"There has been a succession of warmer days, the snow on the roof tiles melted and tinkled merrily down the leads, and on the lawn below great flocks of birds came to feed on the bacon rinds Jacob had so carefully fastened to the birch trees. But today the weather is cold, and the sun sparkles in beautiful colors on the frozen snow. I have been ill again; the stairs become more and more difficult, and I realize it is but a matter of weeks until I am altogether confined to this room. I shall not mind; perhaps because I know it to be my final dwelling place I have come to think it the loveliest room I have ever

known. Or perhaps it is because Stephen shares it with me. At times Caroline comes too, and a thing too dreadful to be named, but always Stephen is here and they do not harm me.

"I was ten when Stephen Mandrake went away, fifteen when he returned—five hellish years in which, more and more, plows and reaper lay idle in the barn and our fields became a wilderness of rank growth, while my father sat with a Bible open on his knee peering forward into a glorious life to come. Only Karl's frequent demands for money brought him back to earth, then he would rouse himself to sell a cow, a pig or one or another of his farm implements. In time acres of his most fertile land also were sold, and when nothing remained but barren fields, dooryard and woods lots, he mortgaged them to the hilt. The Holman organ vanished and Anna's silver spoons, and at last the carved chest and chairs and table her grandfather had brought with him from Hanover, but Anna no longer cared. In the room which had been Heinrich's she caressed, folded and unfolded the few pieces of clothing he had left behind, or lay for hours motionless on the painted wooden bed that had been his.

"A day came when there was no food at all, not a cupful of flour or a shriveled potato, and when Jacob tried to make my father understand he cursed and struck him. Not even his empty belly mattered in his preoccupation with Paradise. Except for the Jehovian Brotherhood, Herman Schultz had no friends, and both my brother and I would have cheerfully starved to death before we would have gone to it for help. If we were not to starve to death, and Anna too, we knew we must bestir ourselves. So one bright spring day with Jacob I walked to Mandrake House and asked for work, any kind of work. There was a butler named Kierly. He unbent from his awful dignity to chuck me under the chin and send me to be a kitchen drudge for wages unbelievably small. Jacob, however, fared better. Having a way with dogs, he was given work in the kennels and soon earned enough to keep food in our bellies and clothes on our backs, while the money paid to me went monthly to satisfy interest owed on the house mortgage.

"I was just past my fourteenth birthday when I became a servant in Mandrake House, a lowly servant who scrubbed, scoured and ran a thousand errands from one floor to another, one servant to another; who ate her food hurriedly from a corner of the kitchen table, aspiring neither to the servants' dining room nor to its haughty company. I

never considered myself abused or put upon because I had to work, and work hard, without gratitude or recreation—and if Jacob did, he kept his discontent to himself. In town and village other half-grown girls and boys fared no better than we, and in an odd way we were happy enough.

“Our walk to Mandrake in a world made new overnight was lovely and we were young enough to romp and play tricks. If ever I had to go fearfully through the dark of Mandrake Wood, Jacob and his swinging lantern were always there to comfort me. It was as natural for me to sing as to breathe, and often as we walked I sang to Jacob, or perhaps I was merely singing to myself the songs Stephen had taught me—‘Annie Laurie,’ ‘The Sands of Dee,’ ‘Kathleen Ma-vourneen.’ Jacob would never admit it but I knew he liked my singing, and in that first year at Mandrake we recaptured much of the companionship we had lost when Jacob set out on his journey into the world of letters.”

There was a grievous sound from Jacob, hunched over the fire, but I went on.

“It was not until my second month at Mandrake that I saw its mistress face to face. Perhaps it was for my own good that in the beginning of our friendship Stephen had warned me never to approach the house, and I never did. Kitchenmaids did not usually venture out from their lowly orbit. But on this occasion there was a grand party at Mandrake, and in preparation for it every servant in the house had labored from dawn until dawn. I do not remember the errand which sent me to the great hall as Caroline, her laces trailing after her, came down the stairs, her jeweled fingers lifting her skirts above her little buckled shoes. Though I distrusted her instantly, it seemed to me that a woman as beautiful as Caroline Mandrake belonged not to the earth but in Paradise. In all my life I had not seen or heard of a décolleté gown. I stood with my mouth open, staring, and I think my obvious admiration pleased her, for she smiled sweetly at me. In time I was to learn that smiles given by Caroline to those who served her were as rare as snow in June.

“I think it was merely a whim of hers to take me from lowly service and make me assistant to her maid Mathilde, who with a good deal of patience taught me to clean, mend and press her mistress’

clothing. When I had learned these things well she sent me to help Folliet, the bearded French seamstress, make unbelievable garments to deck Caroline's lovely body. Given twice the wage I had been paid, I would have been content enough working among fabulous silks and satins, were it not for Caroline's cousin, Harry Phillips, whom entirely without cause I feared and hated. Never once did he speak to me, but time and again his eyes followed me from the shadowy corners of the halls or from behind a window curtain. A dozen times a day he crossed my path, grinning and smirking, not at me, but at the ceiling overhead or the floor beneath my feet.

"From seven in the morning until the same hour in the evening, six days a week, I served Caroline Mandrake. In the hours between and on the seventh day, as well as I could I attended to my mother, who sat silently behind the locked door of her dead son's room, and I cared for Herman Schultz, cooking his food, washing his clothing and keeping his house in order. It was an abnormal way of life for a fourteen-year-old girl, and I do not know how I could have gone on with it if I had not stumbled on a source of amusement and relaxation.

"As far back as I could remember I had heard my father thunderingly denounce the 'Scarlet Woman of Rome.' In my earlier years I had envisioned a fat woman wearing a red gown who dwelt in the town of Rome which I knew to be somewhere in northern New York, but as I grew older I realized in some obscure fashion the Scarlet Woman had to do with a white church standing on a hill over Etten and the pleasant gentleman who, in odd hat and gown, was its minister. The people who attended the church were the despised 'Arish.' The smaller 'Arish' also attended the village school, and perhaps it was sheer perversity which made me choose the little Annies and Maggies and Bridgets for my playmates, rather than the Violas, Jessicas and Maudes with whom I had been instructed to consort. When my school days abruptly ended I missed the small 'Arish' sorely, but I never mustered sufficient courage to visit them, and if they had set foot on my father's land he would have driven them from it, as accursed.

"With Herman doddering over his Bible, Jacob and I were free to go, shyly at first, then with confidence, to kick up our German-American heels at St. Patrick's Irish-American dances. There under the benign eye of Father Kelly and the watchful chaperonage of

Mistresses Fitzgerald or Kelly or O'Brien we danced endless square sets to the tune of Barney Murray's fiddle, his brother's accordion, his son's guitar. To the overburdened boy and girl who were Jacob and I, frolics at St. Patrick's Hall held the lure of all forbidden things, and were a solace for the dreary existence we led under my father's roof and for our tiring drudgery at Mandrake House.

"I am sure, Stephen, that even before we are born our lives are fashioned into a design from which we cannot depart and with which we have little to do. Had it not been necessary for me to use evasion and subterfuge in order to live with any degree of quietude in Herman Schultz's house, perhaps I would not today be sitting in this hidden place writing these words for you to read. And had not a desperate courage been born in me to ward off punishment, I would not have known of its existence.

"In principal my life at Mandrake did not differ greatly from my life at home. Here too I had to walk warily, to lie, conceal, and, if I did not actually steal, I did not hesitate to appropriate temporarily anything of Caroline's that appealed to me. She was taller than I, with the contours of a mature woman, but I quickly became an adept at a sort of legerdemain by which her garments shrank to my size and, after I had dazzled the eyes of Saturday-night dancers with them, regained their original measurements. But needless to say my pilfering occurred only when Caroline and her cousin were away from Mandrake House.

"So on the November day when Caroline, a sealskin dolman buttoned over her handsome gown, coquettish bonnet strings fluttering under her chin, set out with Mathilde for New York, I was as pleased as Punch. And when a few days later I saw Harry Phillips, wrapped grandly in a Scots-plaid Inverness and wearing a two-peaked cap of the same fabric, follow Jacob's luggage wagon to the railroad depot in one of Mandrake's carriages, my happiness knew no bounds.

"Like a withered mouse Folliet kept to the sewing room on the attic floor, eating her food from a tray set on the corner of a worktable, and sleeping in a cubby not a dozen feet away. The house servants gave me a wide berth, that I might not repeat their gossip or wrongdoing to Mathilde. So in my mistress' absence I was free to do as I would, come and go as I pleased.

"Carefully I chose a gown of Caroline's with a loop set among its ruffles, a loop that I could put over my shoulder and so hold my trail-

ing skirts high above the sturdy if agile shoes of my dancing partners. By Saturday night the dress was ready. Length and girth it fitted me as well as ever it fitted Caroline. Altogether satisfied, I slipped out of my own dress and into the altered one for a last glimpse at my elegance in the triple mirror of the dressing room. As I preened and posed, to my horror I heard footsteps in the bedroom behind me. Appalled lest I be caught in the borrowed finery, I blew out the candles and seizing my own dress stepped into one of the deep wardrobes and closed the door after me.

"The footsteps came near and nearer. I heard the draperies drawn back and immediately someone opened the wardrobe next to me. Trembling with fright, I lifted a voluminous skirt and had hardly dropped it over my head when the gowns hanging on the metal rod were thrust aside. Back and forth went Caroline's silks and velvets. Back and forth went Klara under her concealing skirt. Then the unseen person passed on to the next wardrobe and searched that too, and he searched every box and drawer and cupboard in the room. Either he found what he was hunting or the hunt was given up, for the light moved out of the dressing room.

"Gathering up courage to open the wardrobe door, I peeked through the still opened draperies and, to my astonishment, saw Harry Phillips cross the bedroom and apparently vanish into its solid walls—Harry Phillips who with my own eyes I had seen ride away from Mandrake three days before, and who certainly to anyone's knowledge had not returned to it!

"Almost stifled among the dresses, I waited until I ceased to tremble. Then I crept from my hiding place, hastily removed Caroline's dress, popped into my own and, with a shawl wrapped over the filched garment, went staidly down to where Jacob awaited me. But for all my lovely dress I did not enjoy St. Patrick's dance that night.

"Time passed. As timidity lessened, curiosity grew strong within me. I reasoned that unless Harry Phillips was the very devil he could not pass through a solid wall. I was determined to find out how he had disappeared, but I did not know the way to go about it. Then as now Caroline's bedroom was paneled in crimson damask framed with tinted plaster flowers. There was a wide hearth in the very center of the north wall. On either side of it a window, and between windows and corner walls two portraits almost identical in size. On the west side one of Caroline herself, on the east a painting of her mother.

I made up my mind that one of the portraits was the answer to the riddle—but which one? Again and again I stood in the same position I had on the night I saw Harry vanish. Finally I decided to concentrate on the portrait nearest to the west wall—Caroline's. I fingered everything about it which might possibly be the open sesame to a hidden something.

"Though the saner portion of my mind assured me I was wasting a great deal of time on utter nonsense, I kept doggedly at my search. After endless hours of touching and rubbing I inadvertently pressed an ornate scroll and to my delight saw the portrait swing open and reveal a dark space beyond. I was too timid to venture into it, but not too timid to take my needle and draw it crisscross on the gilt until the surface of that particular scroll was rough under my fingers. When I had closed the portrait I began to plan a secret exploration.

"Other than lamps and candles Mandrake House had no light. Clearly I must carry one or the other with me. I settled on candles as being less cumbersome and easier to manage. The time I chose was three o'clock in the afternoon, for at that hour the house servants gathered in their own dining room for tea and the day's gossip. My tray was carried to me in the dressing room; Folliet's to the sewing room. I might reasonably count on two hours of safety.

"After the kitchenmaid had brought my tea, I listened until I heard her feet on the last step of the stairs. Then I bolted both doors of the suite, filled my pockets with candles and, holding a box of matches in my hand, I pressed the roughened scroll. Again magically the portrait slid back in its groove. I lighted a match and stepped into a narrow dark hallway. My teeth chattered and my knees knocked, but I managed to light a candle and, keeping a guiding hand on the wall, I held the light above my head and went forward counting my paces. There were thirty of them before I came to crude wooden stairs. Step by step I went up to a second hallway, almost square, roofed by cobwebbed beams, with a door almost directly in front of me.

"Lighting a second candle, I dripped wax on the floor beside the stairs until it congealed and held the first candle upright. Impatient to know what was on the other side of the closed door, I lighted still another candle. Holding the two high I pushed the door open with my knee, and straightway was more frightened than I had ever been

in my life! Seemingly a million angry insects bumbled and swarmed about me. On trembling legs I stood my ground until my eyes had become accustomed to the gloom.

"Even now I can recall my utter astonishment as I stood bathed in an eerie blue light which filtered through a weird fabric covering the windows. The carpet on which I stood was also blue. A blue mantel-piece was painted with zodiacal signs. A pair of couches with trailing blue covers were drawn before the hearth.

"I went a step farther until the shadows were lighted and saw a broad shiny lacquered cupboard reaching almost to the ceiling, and on its every shelf was row after row of busily ticking clocks. And there were clocks on the mantel, clocks on the tables, clocks hanging in rows one above the other on the walls, small clocks and large, clocks that were tall and slender, clocks that were stubby and broad, clocks of every conceivable shape and sound, all ticking crazily, their swinging pendulums adding to the strange sibilance.

"Terrified, I turned and ran, but I still had enough sense to snatch the candle from the place where I had left it and to obliterate every trace of my visit to the frightening room.

"In time Caroline came home, and again Harry awaited her each night at the newel post. But for months and years Stephen Mandrake did not cross his own threshold, and in his absence I never once heard his name mentioned in Mandrake House.

"I was a thin, undernourished child when first I went to work for Caroline. Whatever harm she did to me at least she saw to it I was well fed. Or I might have owed my abundantly filled trays to Kierly the butler, who never failed to show his appreciation by patting my bottom, delicately pinching my arm or chucking me under the chin. Be that as it may, when I left Mandrake I was a healthy, well-rounded young woman, a woman who fell in love—not with a Johnny or a Franky or a Mickey with whom I danced lancers and quadrilles every Saturday night, but with a man old enough to have sired me, and whom consciously and unconsciously I loved all the days of my life.

"I have written something of the woman Stella Hazeltine and Victor her idiot son. In time I suspected that my father was his father too. Oddly enough after that I lost my fear of the witless uncouth boy and in some strange way felt akin to him. Often, as Jacob and I went home at night, we came on him crouching beside the path. Always by signs and gestures he begged me to sing and, if

I did, like a pleased Caliban he capered beside me all the way home.

"One of my many duties was to care for Caroline's dog Couquin, a spoiled and arrogant little beast. I disliked her intensely until I found that once away from her mistress she was a normal dog who liked nothing better than to chase squirrels, rabbits or even moles in Mandrake Wood, yapping delightedly when they ran from her. Above everyone, even Caroline, Couquin loved the idiot. When he crossed her path she fell on him in a slobbering joy that she showed no one else, and whenever she could ran away to find him.

"One winter afternoon I wrapped my shawl about the little dog to take her for her daily run. We had not gone more than a dozen yards from Mandrake House when she tore herself from my arms and, after regaining her feet, set out yapping vigorously. I thought she had scented the idiot, but the man who carried Couquin back to me was not Victor Hazeltine. It was Stephen Mandrake come home.

"With his coming my life changed as if touched by a fairy wand. After his first night at Mandrake House I never again drew a scarf over Caroline's shoulders or removed it, fetched and carried her dog, her fan or her *sal volatile*. There was rage in Stephen's eyes when he saw me in my servant's dress standing meekly behind his wife's chair. I am sure that from this day Caroline hated me. Taking my arm, he led me from the room, waited until I drew a shawl over my shoulders, and then walked with me all the way home. And never until the night I ran away from it in terror did I enter Mandrake House again.

"Before a week had gone by Stephen had seen my father hunched over his Bible beside the kitchen stove, seen the empty barns and barren lofts, seen Anna in her comfortless house gazing at him from the world of shadows to which she had escaped. All his days my father had ranted against wealth and ease and good living, the things for which Stephen Mandrake stood. Perhaps it was envy that lay at the root of his hatred. I am sure he would have starved and seen us starve too before he would take a penny of Mandrake money. But money had now ceased to concern him. If ever he noticed that when spring came our fields were again green with growth, that cattle grazed in the pastures and our dreary house was once more furnished and comfortable, I am sure he attributed these wonders to the favor Almighty God had bestowed on his servant, Herman Schultz.

"Supposedly some unknown person had rented our farm from the

bank which held the mortgage, and this same unknown person had made my sixteen-year-old brother Jacob his overseer, paid him a decent wage for his service and seen to it that at least a portion of the rent was set aside to pay off the mortgage itself. How these things were done I do not know, but they were done and life was a little heaven until Karl's vulture instinct brought him home. His eyes were not so unseeing as Herman's. With chicanery and guile he sought to wheedle from Jacob and from me the name of our benefactor. When he failed with us, he tried to rouse Herman from his lethargy. We could not have told him if we had wanted to, for we did not know. Karl went away with pockets as empty as when he came. But, evil and tenacious, he was not easily balked. He returned, and it was Karl's avaricious hands that pulled our lives about our ears.

"Stephen had seen to it that I returned to my singing, but he no longer taught me. Instead he sent me to an ill-tempered German in Albany. Now and again he came to the studio to listen without a word and to take me to lunch in the red-plush grandeur of a hotel high above the city. Wonderful days indeed for Klara Schultz, though they were to come to a tragic end. I was completely happy. No longer need I walk warily to avoid the dignified amorousness of Kierly the butler or the stinging slaps from Mathilde's hard hand, cringe before Caroline's bitter tongue or go in fear of Harry Phillips.

"It was no great task to keep our house clean and in order, to brush my mother's lovely hair, to find time to sit and talk to her, to see that she was clean and prettily dressed. Always I have liked to remember her happiness with Jacob and me in the interval that lay between Stephen's coming and the night of her own death. There was plenty of time for me to run light-footed to the stone cottage and sit listening to Stephen's voice, and to sing him the songs he loved; or, when summer came, to sail the river with him as I had sailed when I was a little girl.

"It was in that fair summer I gave myself to Stephen Mandrake. Words tell so little. The bald statement, 'I gave myself to Stephen Mandrake,' reveals nothing of his tenderness, nothing of his love or thought of me. Strangely I do not know just when or where I became his mistress, for the precious thing we shared seemed to have been always. I have lived a long time, known many phases of living, many lands, many men, but never again was I to know the fullness of life I knew in the hours I shared with Stephen.

"The *Falcon* was our rendezvous. On its wind-swept deck I lay on a pallet beside Stephen's naked brown body, listening to the thousand voices of the river, gazing at the high stars, the moonrise, and often the sunrise too. We were happy beyond happiness. My father and mother, concerned only with their spirit worlds, heeded nothing about them. To Jacob I was not a woman but a child, and I am quite sure he thought Stephen's affection for me did not differ from that bestowed on me when at five years I trotted after him like a troublesome loving puppy."

Jacob spat into the fire. "She was wrong there," he said. "I knowed there was somethin' goin' on between Klara an' Stephen Mandrake. I don't mean that they canoodled or anything, but you just kinda got to feel they had a big liking f'r one another. Just the samey I never did suspicion they was livin' together, as you might say. Guess I wouldn'ta made a rumpus if I hadda. Steve Mandrake wouldn't do no real wrong to no one. If he'd been let live, he'd of given Klara a square deal all right. He sure did more f'r my folks than he'd any call to do. Klara didn't think any more of that guy than I did. Usta study 'bout him a lot after he was took off. Figgered mebbe he was a-goin' to run Caroline and the boy friend to hell outta there. Mebbe he was all set to marry Klara. I don't know. Too bad it didn't work out right f'r them. There wasn't a bad bone in their bodies, either of them.

"'Scuse me agin, boss. Don't seem able to keep my trap shut to-night."

Again he spat reflectively and I went on with my reading.

"Stephen was too wise to accept my unlimited companionship, my undivided attention. He saw to it that with Jacob I went as usual to dances, hay rides and moonlight excursions on the river with girls and boys of our own age. I enjoyed everything I did, but always I returned gladly to my lover. In October the *Falcon* was drawn up the ways to rest on its trestles in the basement of the stone cottage, and Stephen and I kept our trysts in the homely room overhead. Throughout the winter the idiot Victor came often to scratch at the door like a forlorn dog and crouch beside the hearth, with animal sounds of pleasure, when Stephen played or I sang.

1888. It was Indian summer of 1890 before disaster came to him and to me—disaster wrought by my brother Karl, and, ironically enough, not because I had become Stephen Mandrake's mistress, but because Karl discovered my supposedly lascivious capering with the Scarlet Woman of Rome.

"Winter had been fleet. Spring came early to the Hudson Valley that year. Great flocks of birds nested in Mandrake Wood and shy little rabbits nibbled at wild arum, as with the sun on our backs we sat watching the fishing boats on the river below draw in their nets of shimmering shad or herring. It's a long, long time ago, Stephen, but I have not forgotten.

"All summer long I sang and studied and sang, between times tended my flock of hens, tended my flower garden, saw to it Herman was clean, and cleanly dressed, as he sat with his Bible under the apple tree, and coaxed my mother to sit beside the open window of her room, although to her the seasons did not change, did not matter. At times she called me by her mother's name and she called my brother Heinrich more often than she called him Jacob.

"Once a week at dawn, with Stephen in the *Falcon* I set sail for Albany and my bearded German teacher, and by moonlight or starshine came home again. Because he was convinced my voice merited better instruction than it was receiving, Stephen made and discarded a dozen plans for my going to New York, and in time to Paris. I knew he intended to go with me. Perhaps he told Caroline of his intent, for she went in anger to my father and poured her venom into his all-unheeding ears. I know that Stephen warned her he had proof, not only of her infidelity, but that an illicit relationship existed with her cousin even before her marriage. And he warned her too that if she ever troubled me again he would make this proof public.

"It was at this time that Stephen told me he had fled from Mandrake because he had discovered Caroline's affair with her Harry Phillips, and he had returned with the determination to force his wife and her lover to leave Mandrake House. The reason he did not was because he found the little girl who had been his companion grown into a woman and he had fallen immediately in love with her. Perhaps his new-found love made him kinder, more tolerant, toward his wife or perhaps it so engrossed him he forgot her and her sinning.

"This is the Ides of March, Stephen. How romantic it sounds, yet

"*April 1st. All Fools' Day*—how oddly the old pagan festivals survive! All over the world 'gauks,' '*poissons d'Avril*' and 'April Fools' are the victims of witless pranks, jokes and tricks, without having the least idea what they are all about. I wonder if the trick played on you is witless. I have again been ill and for a period longer than ever before. Twice Caroline has stood gibbering at the foot of my bed, perhaps in triumph that I shall never see another Stephen master of Mandrake House.

"On the day Peter turned the rusty key in Mandrake's lock and opened the door to me, she stood at the threshold barring my way, and from that day to this she has sought to molest me. Once long ago I fled from her, and her victory was her punishment. Lest you blame me for luring you to this troubled house, I assure you, Stephen, it has been given me to know that in God's good time Mandrake will be at peace, and you will live here and your children after you and their children, and God willing, as long as one brick stands on another, those of Mandrake blood will dwell on Mandrake land and the name will mean again what it once did in the Hudson Valley.

"I am very weak. Even the few steps I take between my bed and the chair at the window are exhausting. Yet I must not die until I have accomplished the thing I have set out to accomplish: to see with my own eyes one of Stephen's breed in this house; to see him walk the terrace, as long ago Stephen walked it in the sunset. You are very like him. I know you to be of his height and coloring. When I glance at your pictured face it seems to me the other Stephen looks out of your eyes, and it is difficult for me to remember I am not the young girl he loved, but a raddled old woman searching my memory to write of her life at Mandrake long ago and also of the years after she went away.

"My brother Karl never loved anyone in the world but himself. When he became aware of our better way of life he smelled money, but he had not the wit to discover where it came from. It is ironical to remember that his wily mind never discerned the possibility of my relationship to Stephen, nor that it was Stephen who was our benefactor. I do not know how he discovered our attendance at the St. Patrick's dances, but solemnly he demanded that Jacob and I swear

on the Bible we would never attend another. Jacob laughed, defied him and went unscathed.

"I did not fare so well. In Jacob's absence Karl bound me to a tree and, having on bended knee begged Heaven to forgive me my sins, beat me with a carriage whip. Stephen heard me scream and came as quickly as his horse could gallop. He leaped from the saddle, tore the whip from Karl's hand, broke it into bits, and with his riding whip gave Karl a taste of his own medicine. He saw to it that Karl was barred by law from our farm. For a long time we neither saw nor heard of him. I think that to an extent we forgot about him, but knowing my evil brother as we did we should have realized how insecure was our security.

"September passed and October. The *Falcon* still sailed the river, or through blustering moonlight nights lay at anchor. Often in years to come I wondered what became of Stephen's cherished boat—if in time others loved it as we had loved it or if, abandoned, it was left to rot.

"To my mother, daily retreating more deeply into her silent world, even Jacob had become strange. I was her sole link with life, and there could be no question of my living away from her. Yet Stephen was determined my singing instruction should go on, and in time arranged for a weekly lesson in New York, though in 1890 this meant eight hours of train travel, going and coming.

"The last day Klara Schultz was to live was beautiful and bright. Before sunup I arose and gave Jacob his breakfast, helped him with the milking, cleaned and fed Herman and spooned into Anna's quivering mouth the little food that kept her alive. At eleven o'clock I called Jacob to the house, showed him his own luncheon, my father's and mother's, and he promised to tend to them. Then, dressed in my best, I walked quickly to the stone cottage where Stephen waited for me. Behind his black horses we drove to a country inn and lunched beside a window overlooking blazing autumn hills. Even now I find it incredible that no breath of scandal touched Stephen's interest in me—and this in a community where gossip was meat and drink."

Jacob snorted loudly. I glanced up and waited for him to speak. "There wasn't, hey?" he said. "The poor dumb kid! Mebbe the folks didn't say things out loud. Mebbe they didn't have the guts to.

The Mandrakes were big shots around here. But that didn't hold anyone off from doin' some pretty rotten thinkin'."

He said no more and I went on.

"It was a windy October night when, all unknowing, I lay for the last time in Stephen's arms. We had come home again at dusk and I'd hurried to help Jacob feed his stock, gather the day's eggs, lock away my hens, see to it that Herman was fed and helped up to his bed. When Anna too had been soothed and fed, I was free to sit with Jacob at the lamplighted table and eat my supper. Then Jacob in his fine rubber-tired wagon went off to visit the Lizzie or Nellie who at the moment held his heart in her hands."

"Shucks!" muttered Jacob almost belligerently. "No woman ain't held my heart in her hands." Again I waited, and again Jacob lapsed into silence, and I continued.

"When I no longer heard his carriage wheels I locked the doors of my mother's room and of Herman's, ran quickly through the starlit darkness of Mandrake Wood and climbed down the cliff to where the *Falcon's* dinghy rocked beside the wharf. Until the ship's brassy gong marked ten o'clock I lay with Stephen. Then I went cheerfully shoreward with him and up the cliff to Mandrake Wood. In the shadow of a giant oak on my father's land I lingered for a little in those beloved arms. We kissed, and I ran from him down the path to our house, where in the shadow of the porch I stood watching until he had vanished.

"To my astonishment the door was locked. Stupidly I twisted the knob, drawing it toward me and pushing it back, all to no purpose. Puzzled, I walked around to the kitchen door and found that too was locked. I began to be very thoroughly frightened. I knew I had not fastened the doors. Without help my father could neither go upstairs nor come down. Nothing on earth could induce Anna to leave her room. Who then had locked me out?

"On the bare chance that Jacob had returned and, either thoughtlessly or to tease me, had turned the keys, I threw handful after handful of gravel against his window. Jacob did not answer. The kitchen clock struck eleven. I knew it would be two hours at the

very least before Jacob came home, and already I was shivering with cold. For warmth I turned my long skirt over my jacket shoulders and, sitting down on the milk bench, tried to reason things out. As always when troubled I thought of Stephen. I decided to walk the fields to a spot opposite Mandrake House and if there was light in his windows climb the stile and tell him of my predicament.

"At that time, except for my father's farm and Stella Hazeltine's to the north, all the land from the stone quarry to the river was part of the Mandrake Estate. What is now known as the Feddows Road was merely a continuation of Mandrake Lane. Just beyond where the lane branched, it was steeply banked on the east side and tapered gradually toward level ground at the stone cottage. At the point opposite to the stile leading into the Mandrake gardens, the bank was not too difficult to descend. I was halfway down when I heard someone walking quickly toward where I stood. Hoping he would pass without discovering me, I crouched silently among the bushes. But the footsteps did not pass. Below me a man stood whispering; a second answered him; then both seemed to go on.

"I continued to scramble toward Mandrake Lane and walked south, feeling along the hedge for the stile. Suddenly out of the darkness a hand was thrust over my mouth, another around my shoulders. For a terrified moment I stood still, then kicked, twisted, writhed, and at last freeing myself ran blindly to crash full tilt into the bank. There I lay dazed and fearful, listening to running feet come near and nearer.

"Perhaps it was the instinct of self-preservation that caused me to creep up the rise and close my hand over a length of wood. Scarcely breathing, I waited for what would come next, too winded, or perhaps too scared, to cry out. Just below me muted voices spoke one to the other. Then one person went on; one remained. In desperation I lunged forward and struck with all my might. Someone groaned and fell. Completely mad, I leaped into the lane and beat frantically at the thing that lay in the dirt.

"I heard the second man returning. I stumbled back to crouch again among the bushes. In the darkness someone halted and cursed. There was silence. A match flared. In utter bewilderment I saw Karl's face. It was only by hands clasped over my mouth that I stilled the scream that rose in my throat. Another match flared, and another. Then Karl spoke to my father. Frightened as I was, I thought

strength to walk the breadth of his own house, race after me the length of Mandrake Lane?

"I think Karl must have set a branch or a piece of paper aflame. The light lasted long enough for me to see that it was truly my father who lay stark and still, his beard matted with blood, his eyes set and staring. I thought I had killed him, and for a little I died myself.

"Again Karl spoke, this time to me. He called me wanton and summoned me to see what I had done. Desperately I tried to pray, but when I remembered the relentless command, 'Thou shalt not kill,' the prayers stuck in my throat. Half crazed I turned to the Devil and implored his help. I am sure that if on that night His Satanic Majesty had appeared in a sulphurous glow, I would have clasped his burning hand and gone trustingly with him to Hell, for no hell begotten of devils could equal that in which I found myself.

"Help did come to Klara, though it was not bestowed by the flaming gentleman of hoof and horn, but from a source least expected. When at last Karl ceased reviling me, the silence was more dreadful than his voice. Then a shadowy thing moved through the gloom, and when Karl spoke next it was with neither a parson's words nor voice before he took to his cowardly heels and ran. Someone laughed horribly long and shrill. In cold fright I lost hold of the bush to which I clung and, tumbling down the bank, fell at my mother's feet. How Anna knew my need that night, how she came from her locked room, I do not know. I know only that from her own poor store she gave me courage. Kissing me and wiping my sweaty face, she told me to go to Stephen, and she walked with me to where the lights of Mandrake's windows glimmered through the trees. And then she went away, and to this day it bewilders me to realize that my love for Stephen was no secret to my mother. I never saw her again, and for long years I did not know that within the hour she lay dead in the tangled grass of Mandrake Lane."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE corridor clock struck eleven. For two full hours I had read the words written down by Sarah Mandrake. I was cramped and parched, and laying the pages aside bade Peter fetch brandy and whatever food he could lay hand upon. Ellen went with him, and for a little the room was silent, and then Jacob replenished the hearth and stood staring into the fire.

"You sure brought it all back," he said. "I'd forgotten some of that night but most of it I'll remember till I lie down dead. Karl beat it down the road to Van Etten and brought folks back with him, but the old man was gone. Only my old lady was there an' she was dead, like Klara says.

"They gotta shutter off Mandrake stable and carried her home, an' there was the old man, jumping around crazy-like, howling at God an' at Klara, an' neither of 'em was around to listen at him. Even now it makes me sore to think that for over a year I just about hadda carry him up an' down stairs, but he was strong enough to go chasin' hell out of a poor scared kid. I never did figger out if he'd been playin' possum for all that time, or if Karl kinda gave him a shot in the arm just by tellin' him about Klara an' me bein' sinners. Anyhow, Klara didn't hurt him none. It took a coupla guys to git him into a strait jacket before they hauled him off to the 'sylum. I didn't give a damn what they did with him. Never went near him. Never saw him agin, didn't even know he was dead until a coupla years after he'd kicked the bucket.

"You know, that night it was way after twelve when I got home. I come up to the house an' it looked like all hell had broke loose. Folks was millin' round the yard, an' inside the old man was roped

down on the bed, yellin' like a loon. There wasn't no sign of Klara nowheres, an' nobody hadda notion where she was. I tell you I was just about nuts. Went over to Mandrake, but there warn't no lights showin', an' I didn't think she'd be around there anyways. She wasn't in the stone cottage, an' when I rowed out to the *Falcon* she wasn't there neither. I gotta lantern, lit it an' hunted the barns. Called her everywhere I thought she might be. An' then someone came a-whisperin' the old man'd killed her, an' I'll bet before I got back to the house a dozen people told me he'd caught Klara out with some fella an' flung her in the river. So when I got inside an' the Doc told me they'd have to take the old man to the nut factory, I told him if he wanted to take him outside an' bury him alive I'd get him a shovel to do it with.

"Well, they hauled Pa off. The undertaker come an' fixed up my old lady, an' then I had time to git at Karl and make him spit what happened. Karl he swore up an' down they was a-huntin' Klara but they never did catch her, then he turned right around an' said that she was with a fella an' it was the fella what beat up the old man, but that no one laid a finger on Klara an' it was all hooey about the old man killin' her. He lied so much I just gave up tryin' to git him to tell the truth, beat the hell outta him an' let it go at that. I did a good job, too. Karl wasn't in no shape to show up at my old lady's funeral—even if I'd let him, an' I wouldn't have. There wasn't nobody at the funeral but me an' a parcel neighbors. A coupla Jehovahians showed up, but I took down the old man's shotgun an' started after them, an' they got away a-flyin'. I always did blame all of our trouble on the damn Jehovahians.

"Ma was buried before I heard Stephen Mandrake was dead. There was a lotta talk about the old man bumping him off too, an' folks began to say more mean things about Klara, an' I couldn't take it. I guess I went loony because, friend or foe, anyone who come inside our gate I took a pot shot at them. After a while folks let me be. Well, one day I went up to the bank that had our mortgage an' told 'em I was pullin' out. Pulled out the same night, took my clothes an' that's all I did take. In a way I guess I went a-huntin' Klara, 'cause I never did believe she was dead. I wasn't no more than a kid myself, an' I didn't know how to git started at huntin' her. So I didn't do so good an' after a while I just kinda gave up an' got me a boat job."

There was something so utterly drear and forlorn about Jacob when he ceased speaking of his lost sister, I filled his glass to the brim and watched him swallow it neat. I swallowed my own brandy neat also, but Froste and Vanningham, being lesser men, added a dash of water to theirs, and when we had swilled it to the last drop, eaten every crumb Peter had brought and smacked lips over good coffee, I turned refreshed to the words Sarah Mandrake had written for me to read, and began anew.

"I stood at the stile watching the shadow that was my mother disappear into the darkness. Then I crept toward Stephen's lighted window, shaded my eyes, peered through the glass and saw him propped against his pillows. I opened the door, stumbled toward him, sobbing from my constricted throat, 'I've killed my father, Stephen. I've killed my father,' and fell on my knees beside his bed. When he questioned me and heard what I had to tell, he told me to leave the house quickly by way of the garden and, keeping to the shadows, get to the stone cottage. No matter how long he was in coming I was to wait for him there, to be wise and clever and above all not to be afraid. I was to take his greatcoat from the clothespress and wrap myself in it. For a brief moment he drew me down beside him on the bed and kissed me until I grew less frightened.

"The door behind us opened. I sensed rather than saw Caroline Mandrake come into the room, but I heard her laughter. And at the sound I fled, fled through the maze of cypress and yew clipped into the grotesque images of beasts which even in the broad light of day were scary, and in the dim light of stars terrifying indeed.

"At the stone cottage I crept through the boat cellar up the stairs, pushed up the trap door and stood in the loved, familiar room. Then I lowered the door again, dragged a heavy chest to hold it fast and, kneeling at a window, strained my eyes into the darkness, waiting for Stephen Mandrake to come and make me safe. But it was not Stephen I saw, but men who in the light of a single lantern carried a dreadful something between them. Had my very life depended upon doing so, I could not for another instant have endured being shut within the cold gloom of the cottage.

"There was a rarely used door leading into a field beyond, and it was this door I opened on its rusty hinges. I closed it behind me, crept on hands and knees across the lane to the tall roadside hedge and

in its shadow walked quickly until I stood on the haunted hill. Long ago a black man had hanged himself from a tall willow tree, and until time frayed the rope and his rotted body dropped into the dreary well beneath, no one at all had found him. They said his ghost returned, and moaning and groaning throughout the hours of night swung from the tree. Few in town or village had the courage to pass the hilltop after darkness fell, not even Herman Schultz armed with his righteousness. Yet now I *must* pass it. Holding my skirts waist high, I ran and ran, sure that the black man creaked and swung over my head, ran along the road that sloped down to the abandoned quarry, ran a long mile past a lonely swamp. Then, fighting for breath, I stood for a little moment leaning against a wall where, after she had danced herself weary with merry little Maggies and Sadies, Frankies and Tommies, on Saturday nights a thousand years ago, the girl Klara Schultz had sat and blithely sung.

"For a little time only I rested there. Then to the alarming cacophony of strumming wires overhead I went on, chanting a reassuring litany of distance and place. 'Only two miles more to Feddows,' I told myself, 'three to Smooth Rock, four to Van Cart's Bridge, five to Kurant's Hill.'

"In the year 1890 the town of Van Etten had no street lights. A single kerosene lamp stood on top of the tall gate before the inn, shedding a pale light over the wooden town pump. There I halted long enough to gulp water from the pail hanging on its spout, wash my sweaty hands, my dusty face. I did not in the least know where I was going, did not care. It was enough to know that with every mile my bloody father and Caroline's derisive laughter lay farther behind.

"At the inn the road turned south and I turned with it to the footbridge over Buttermilk Falls, then uphill again passing the high wall of the village cemetery and, again twisting skirts waist high, I ran as if the dead had risen from their graves to follow me. Far and fast I went to Reyard's Hollow where my weary knees buckled under me. I fell into a roadside ditch and lay until my heart had slowed its frantic beat. Then fighting drowsiness, I arose and staggered up the long slope of Morro Hill and down again to a sleeping village that dipped its toes into the river I had so often sailed with Stephen. Neither cat nor dog prowled its lonely streets, and there was no sound left in the world save the lapping of tidewater over the rocks.

"Somewhere a clock struck one. but I did not know whether it told

the hour or the half and, except as guide for the darkness I might count on to cover my flight, I did not care. The night grew cold and colder. In shivering misery I buttoned Stephen's coat, turned the collar about my throat and walked a road shadowed by overhanging trees curtained in autumn mist. Sometimes a branch snapped overhead, or cattle lowed mournfully from a field. I heard the sound of night birds' wings, of stealthy scurrying things. Owls hooted eerily. Again and again I took to scared heels and ran, stumbling into ditch and gully, falling, getting up again, going on and on.

"There was gleam of firelight among the trees. Tramps! For who else would sit beside a fire in the hours of night? With every story I'd heard of beggars, robbers, murderers, rapers of women coming into my head, I crossed the road, crouched almost double, climbed a crumbling wall and circled widely away until I left the firelight behind me. Then I climbed back into the road. Another village slept behind blank windows. A dog howled. On weary legs, my head lowered against my breast, half sleeping, half awake, I went on. Again a dog howled, and close behind I heard the *pad-pad* of its galloping feet. I could no longer run, but as quickly as might be I strode on until the gloomy gate of the insane asylum loomed before me. Glittering, phosphorous eyes were within arm's length. In panic and weariness I stumbled and fell prone on the roadside grass.

"A dripping tongue licked my ear, and the largest dog ever I saw in my life stretched beside me, his friendly wagging tail telling he meant well. I put my trembling arms about his neck, drew the huge head down and, burying my face in its scruff, for the first time in the fantastic night wept long and hard. Often I had heard that the Devil in the guise of a dog walks the earth at night. When my fingers traced the letters P L U T O on his collar—knowing that, like God, the Devil has many names—I was sure the beast lying with paws spread over my lap was indeed Satan himself. I did not care. If Pluto were the Devil, then the Devil had befriended me. In sheer gratitude I kissed the spot between his pointed ears.

"But Pluto had more serious business than love-making to consider. Arising, he set off sedately down the road, and when I did not follow returned to nudge me and lifting his muzzle howled dismally until I, thrusting a hand under his collar, went beside him, wondering if I walked the streets in the broad light of day, would I be seized and immediately hanged from the stanchions of the Poughkeepsie bridge.

I still had sense enough to know I might not keep on walking indefinitely, but, without money or anything but the clothes on my back, what *could* I do?

"Perhaps Stephen reached out from death to help me. As I hugged his coat tighter about my chilly body, something in an inner pocket pressed against me. I drew forth a wallet and though I could not see its contents felt the crackle of money in my fingers. Hope quickened my heart and my feet. With money I might take a train to New York, and surely in its immensity Klara Schultz could lose herself.

"From a hide-out I would write Stephen Mandrake, and with his coming my troubles would vanish into thin air. How very young and trusting was Klara Schultz, who did not believe in the dreadful God to whom her father paid homage, but who would have wagered her life's blood on the infallibility of Stephen Mandrake!

"Dawn began to lighten the east, and knowing that Poughkeepsie was scant miles ahead, I hastened my steps, but Pluto had other plans. He dragged me with him, turned from the road into an open field, and when I halted and took my hand from his collar, he halted too, growling softly, and when I tried to turn back to the road stood in the path before me, his teeth stripped angrily. I was too tired to argue, even with a dog, and it might be that, better than I, Pluto knew what he was about. With my hand again on his collar I went with him down a steep path until cinders crunched under my feet, rails like silver ribbons stretched away, and close at hand were the colored lights of a railroad switchyard.

"Pluto had been patient with my stumbling progress, but now his business was pressing. He tugged his collar from my hand and galloped away. I felt as if my last friend had played me false but staggered to where a group of men in the eerie light of red lanterns hailed Pluto boisterously, tousling his great head and feeding him from their pockets. Without a single word, I toppled into the cinders at their feet. Oily black hands lifted and carried me to the caboose of a freight train idling in the yards, laid me on a grimy bench, straightened my clothing and went away asking no questions. A white-haired man at a table piled high with flimsy yellow papers peered solemnly over the rim of his spectacles and asked but one: 'Ain't you Holy Herman's kid?' I shook a negative head. Never willingly as long as I lived would I go bearing the stigma of Holy Herman's blood.

"What fantastic tale I told I do not know, but meekly asked ner-

mission to ride his train. He neither gave nor withheld it but went away without a word, still peering over the rim of his spectacles. Cars crashed and bumped, wheels screamed shrilly, a bell rang *ding-dong, ding-dong*, and before its echo ceased Klara Schultz was asleep.

"The sun had not yet risen when first I lay down on the grimy bench. It was well toward setting when I awakened. I saw a row of shiny dinner buckets dangling from pegs behind a potbellied stove, saw red tin cuspidors beside armchairs smudged by oily fingers, chairs with rear legs so shortened they appeared like awkward spraddle-legged bugs. I heard the grinding wheels repeating endlessly: 'You-killed-Herman-you-killed-Herman-you-killed-Herman-Schuuuultz.' I held my arms over my ears to shut out the sound. The man kicked a chair forward, gave me a sandwich from his dinner bucket, through the open door of the stove heated coffee in a blackened skillet, and in a tin cup put it beside me on the chair. Then he went away, leaving me to eat, drink and explore Stephen's blessed wallet. Unbelievably I held in my hands more money than I ever expected to have in my life. A lone ten-dollar bill I thrust into the pocket. I kissed the wallet, opened my waist, slipped it beneath my corset, and never again did I lay my eyes on it.

"Only as a strange mosaic do I remember the time which came after. Perhaps I was overtired, or already ill. At best I have only an indistinct memory of walking beside someone over a maze of railroad track, of eating what he gave me to eat in a dingy restaurant, of going with him up one street, down another. On that night the Scarlet Woman of Rome again touched the fruit of Holy Herman's loins, and I lay on a narrow cot in a Catholic refuge for girls; lay but did not sleep. It may have been corroding remnant of my father's bitter hate for Rome that clung and kept me wakeful, or perhaps it was the bleeding Christ gazing reproachfully from the wall, perhaps fear of betrayal, or of the esoteric crimes I had so often heard whispered of nuns.

"All that night I huddled under Stephen's coat waiting for day. When hushed footsteps passed my door and I heard the chant of chapel Mass I got up, went quickly down the stairs to the street. That much I remember, and a hat I bought with part of the crisp ten-dollar bill—a blue hat with a gay bird's wing and a pretty dotted veil—and I remember a restaurant where I ate. But most of all I

drake's sudden death, and how I screamed aloud in the crowded eating place that I had not killed one man, I had killed two. But what I did afterward I shall never know. Many days had passed when I awakened in the charity ward of a hospital. Stephen's wallet was gone and his coat too, and again I had nothing but the clothes on my back.

"There were few helping hands held out to penniless girls in the benighted decade of the nineties. What I would have done if a kindly doctor had not befriended me, I do not know—perhaps joined the strolling sisterhood of the pavements. Again I became a humble servant in a great house, working furiously and endlessly to forget that I was twice a murderess, but it is God's mercy to heal the wounds of the young quickly. When spring came, if I was not happy, at least I was not unhappy.

"*April 15th.* I wish I might write down that I was forever true to Stephen Mandrake's memory, that I lived my life unmarried and unhampered by passion, but in all honesty I did not. Stephen had not been in his grave a year when I married a boy whom I did not know at all, who in the idiom of a later day had 'picked me up' and who embellished my finger with a wedding ring only when he had failed to establish more informal relations.

"It was December before I was strong enough to leave the hospital and begin life all over again. For the rest of the winter I earned my board and keep and the magnificent salary of fourteen dollars a month. My fellow servants were staid and mature women, the butler and coachmen elderly, and as for my employers, I did not know whether they were young or old, for in the months I was in their household I never laid eye on them. I knew no one at all even approaching my own age, nor did I know how to go about making friends. When spring came and my eighteen-year-old blood stirred in me I came to envy the girls who waltzed daringly in the streets to the wheezy music of hand organs, envied them the notice of boys in toothpick shoes, gaudily banded hats and starched white waistcoats, and wished longingly that I too might have a boy to call me 'kiddo,' take me trolley riding, treat me to wonderful ice-cream sodas at Huyler's candy store, or on Sunday afternoon ride with me in the swan boats on Central Park Lake.

"If I had dared enter a church I might have found decent friends

and amusements among its communicants, but churches were dedicated to a God who my guilty soul knew very well wanted nothing at all to do with murderers. So far as I knew no temple had as yet been erected to my friend of the forked tail and cloven hoof.

"Day and night, week and month I was alone and I was lonely. In time the blight of Herman's terrible creed renewed itself and in the silence of the night whispered and whispered, 'Thou shalt honor thy father and thy mother,' 'Thou shalt not kill.' Even the solace of remembering Stephen's love was denied me, for did not the Bible denounce such as he as adulterers and brand Klara Schultz a fornicator and paramour? Truly the girl Klara was accursed. When I came on an engraving of the hanging of Mrs. Surratt, I stood before it in spellbound horror, knowing well it was only my devil's luck which kept me too from dangling at a rope's end.

"There came nights when, awakening in terror, I was sure Herman Schultz gibbered at me from the shadows. Even more than I had feared his flesh I feared his ghost, and in that dreadful time I wished I had the right, like the little Maggies and Sadies whom I had known, to kneel penitent in the confessional and, forgiven my sins, go free of guilt. In this day and age it is incredible to consider that I was less than a hundred miles from the town of Van Etten and yet knew no more what had happened or was happening there than if it lay on the far side of the world. I made fantastic plans to return disguised by dyed hair, painted face and such a dramatic cloak and veil as was worn by the sinful mother in *East Lynne*, the one theatrical performance I had ever seen. But I lacked that particular brand of courage, and I never did. Perhaps the boy I married served a good purpose, for he released me from the welter of fears in which I was imprisoned, and even the sorrow and trouble he brought me were wholesome.

"In the fabulous nineties there were very few places a girl might go by herself, and there was no one to go with me except a kindly, bonneted and shawled elderly cook who took me on the incredible 'El' to see the Aquarium, walked tirelessly with me in Central Park, showed me the department stores that lined Fourteenth Street and even reached as far north as Twenty-third. The same cook warned me never to speak to strangers and told hair-raising tales of sinful brothels and white slavers. Her favorite story was the terrible fate of Vinnie Barnes, who, seduced and abandoned, was found drowned

and floating in the river, holding under her left arm a letter that begged her mother's forgiveness, while under the right was a polite note to the morgue-keeper inclosing a ten-dollar bill to compensate for the trouble she was about to cause! How Vinnie managed to keep her arms clasped about the letters and prevent their floating away, the cook did not explain. I believed every word she told me, but it did not keep me from speaking to strangers.

"In a department store far downtown I had fallen in love with a huge fountain circled by tall green plants. Secretly I promised myself I would return to eat nectar, drink ambrosia, at one of the little iron tables which surrounded it—not with my friend the cook! And the first time I did, I saw Francis Holley sitting five tables away. If my vocabulary had included such words, I would have described Francis as the epitome of style, culture and poise. When he knowingly twisted his waxed mustache and smiled at me, I almost swooned in gratitude. After that on my weekly afternoon of freedom I found him sitting at the fountain, and each Thursday he moved one table nearer until on the sixth he drew out the opposite chair, draped a fawn-colored raglan over another, topped it with a high-crowned derby hat, flipped yellow gloves across his tightly trousered knee, and from that day on we played an amorous game of fox and geese.

"Never did Francis know I was just a serving maid, yet I had known his father only a month when I told him every fact and facet of my life. If Francis Holley had possessed a tenth of his father's qualities, I would have lived with him forever, borne his children and, God help me, perhaps become such a matron as his mother and in time died in the odor of virtue and respectability. Or perhaps I would not have. Perhaps before I was ever born, it was destined that I was to live the life I have lived, die the death I shall die.

"Francis had passed twenty-three without reaching his senior year at college, but to one who did not know senior from freshman this made little difference. From the heights of erudition had he not looked with favor on my humble self? To explain my limited freedom I blithely lied myself into being the favorite companion of a female relative who could scarcely bear to have me out of her sight. Francis must have been well taken in, for he knew my address, and it would have needed very little wit to discover that the Katherine Smith who on her hospital bed had metamorphosed from Klara Schultz was no more than a poorly paid domestic drudge. To this day I can describe

in minute detail each gown, jacket and hat Francis purchased for me in our brief time of marriage, but do not at all recall what persuasion he used to urge me toward wedlock. It must have been potent to overcome my fear that in the intimacy of marriage I would tell much that was better left untold.

"However, there came a bleak November evening when the pseudo-Katherine stood on her trembling legs beside Francis Holley and became his wife. Later, in an ornate suite of an ornate hotel, maudlin with the wine of our wedding feast, my new husband let me know that even without an inkling of my origin he had cast himself in the role of King Cophetua while I must play the beggar maid. Once he had casually told me he was one of the 'Boston Holleys,' and if he had mentioned he was one of the 'African Hottentots' it would have meant as much. But very soon indeed I was to know exactly what it meant to be a 'Boston Holley.'

"In illicit association with Stephen Mandrake I had been given tenderness, consideration and selfless love. In legal alliance with Francis Holley I was to know shame and degradation such as I had never dreamed existed, and know that the man I married was without honor, self-respect, energy or ambition. For a time we lived opulently within stone's throw of Central Park. The sight of its clean winter-bared trees was in a measure compensation for the contemptible actions of my husband.

"With the prodigality of one disbursing money not his own, he provided me with a handsome trousseau, and my first stylish changeable silk from Benjamin Altman's store was less costly than a pair of gloves would be today. From Stern Brothers came a puff-shouldered beaver cape, its upstanding collar reaching to my 'Psyche knot' (stylishly wrought by the first hairdresser who ever laid hands on me) for which Francis handed over the stupendous sum of \$12.75. At Le-Boutellier's he selected and paid \$24.50 for an extravagant mink jacket, collared, lapelled and handsomely rippling below my 'wasp' waist. At Hearn's department store he bought me a cloak of 'watered' pink bordered with sealskin, lined in white satin and reaching to the heels of my cloth-of-gold slippers, and for this Messrs. Hearn demanded a monstrous \$15.00.

"Seemingly there was no limit to Francis' generosity, for at the fashionable dressmaker's, Madame de Vrie's, he ordered made to my measure a coat and skirt of dove-gray broadcloth that flared about

my toes, pinched at the waistline, its upstanding collar, huge cuffs and lapels braided within an inch of its life; also an evening gown of stiff pink brocade, one of cardinal velvet, and a black satin gown with enormous puffed sleeves, its bodice and many-gored skirt trimmed with endless yards of fringe and jet. And from Madame also came a bottle-green Newmarket and house 'wrappers' of pink and green and blue tied with ribbons, frothing with lace, to delight the eye of Francis on our home-staying evenings. And I had gloves galore, and shoes and hosiery, nightgowns, petticoats, drawers and corset-covers of finest muslin and linen, ribboned, laced and embroidered, for as yet the practice of fashioning intimate garments of silk was confined to persons not mentioned in polite society.

"I had toques and feathered 'picture' hats, 'sailors' trimmed with stiff ribbons and impossible bird's wings, small glittering bonnets for evening and fur caps and muffs to match my jackets. If my marriage to Francis served no better purpose, it gave me a pride in myself that acted as an anodyne to my ailing soul—and also it gave me a wardrobe ample enough to endure until I could replace it with one I had earned myself.

"Francis had not told the 'Boston Holleys' of his wife, nor had they known of my existence, until I stood with him at the threshold of the Holley Back Bay mansion on Christmas Eve, and I firmly believe they would never have known of it if Francis had had the money to keep me far and wide from them. Considering the fact that their son's marriage to a nobody must have distressed them, in their own fashion they were decent enough and perhaps it was I who acted badly. I had been a loving child. I was a loving woman. Until Anna's mind clouded she supplied my need of affection, and in full store Stephen Mandrake had lavished it on me. Now I was famished for love and when I discovered there was little of it in the feeling Francis cherished for me, I turned to his family to find it and cold comfort I had from them.

"In the most austere Victorian tradition inside and out, the house to which Francis brought me was enormous, and the family of which I had become a part was enormous too. It consisted of his mother and father, one grandfather, two grandmothers, three sisters, an aunt, an uncle and his wife who permanently lived under the Holley roof, and there were besides many relatives who visited for hours, days, weeks and months. One and all they set about impress-

ing me with the honor Francis had bestowed on my humble self, and one and all they began the molding of lowly Katherine Smith into a proper wife for a scion of the Holley blood. Never once was I openly advised, criticized or censored. Theirs was the indirect method, and in time the indirect method drove me into doing many things I would not otherwise have done. From morning till night my speech, manners, apparel and general deportment were subject to the gentlest of suggestions, hints and innuendoes, and if, like the scorpion, I had had a poisonous tail, in sheer rage I would have undoubtedly stung myself to death.

"I was well aware of my ignorance of the gracious art of living. Still, in my service to Caroline I had gathered the rudiments of good manners and, though I say it who shouldn't, I have always possessed good taste. I needed just a little clever polishing, and all I got was whining complaint from Francis and lifted eyebrows from the ladies of the household. Had anyone at all quietly told me where I erred, or explained the use of the vast array of silver which accompanied even the simplest meal, I would have been pathetically grateful, but no one did. If I misused fork, knife, spoon or anything else, Mrs. or Miss Holley, or perhaps an aunt or grandmother, would hold the article coily within sight and for my instruction spin a silly yarn about its origin and use. The result was not fortunate. I waded stoically through my food, using whatever silver came first and not caring for the lifted eyebrows of a Holley female or caring if a Miss or Mrs. Holley, regarding me, said meditatively, '*Dear Katherine, do you not really think blue (or green or red as the case might be) is somewhat vulgar in a gown for this occasion?*' and then added kindly, '*Still, color is not so important as the manner in which the gown is worn.*'

"In six weeks I had become very much out of conceit with the Boston Holleys and this included Francis, but not at all his father, for whom I cherished a great deal of affection and respect. In the idiom of today, Francis might be a big bad wolf in New York, but in Boston he reminded me a good deal of the countless guppies that swam in the aquariums of his mamma's 'Fern Room.' Still, I might have endured him, and his family too, longer if it had not been for the coming of Patrick Chaney, youngest son of the Earl of Tyrone and a mere five brothers removed from the title. I had no intention of falling in love with Patrick, nor did I actually for a very long time but I had fallen out of love with Francis—if ever I was in love with him

at all—and was so irritated by my too-studious social education I was very ready to commit mischief.

“Supposedly the suitor for the eldest Miss Holley, my foremost social mentor, so far as I could see Patrick cared a lusty damn neither for Miss Holley nor for the gods of Back Bay society. His stories were altogether Rabelaisian, his guffaws set the chandeliers atingle, and there was nothing he liked better than to drink his whisky neat, kiss pretty housemaids behind convenient doors, bellow ‘Peggy in the Low-Backed Car’ and ‘The Kerry Dancers’ at the top of his voice, and in more tender moments warble, ‘Oh, bee-lave me if aaal those endearing young chaarms.’ Everlastingly he addressed me as ‘Kath-e-leen Mah-vourneeen, me darlin’,’ and made no secret of the fact he preferred me to the Misses Holley, singly or en masse.

“When the family made their staid yearly migration to a resort as bleakly New England as Boston, Patrick came along and continued to make the welkin ring with his great booming voice. Years later, when I asked what in the world kept him so long under the Holley roof, he answered with the simple truth that he was without funds and while awaiting his next allowance the free board and lodging furnished by the Boston Holleys was very welcome indeed. For thirty long days Patrick made ducks and drakes of the established social order. Never did I don my decorous ankle-length flannel bathing suit, cover my hair with an ugly mobcap, my legs with cotton stockings, to venture for a timid dip in the Holleys’ reserved portion of the Atlantic Ocean, but Patrick, striped like a zebra in ‘foreign’ swimming costume, would appear and bear me in his arms, frightened and elated, beyond the depths considered decent for a respectable female. The whole Holley tribe were shocked to their marrows, blaming not Patrick but me for his shenanigans.

“For the first time since I became a member of the household the ladies came out in the open with their disapproval of Francis’ wife. I was warned to watch my manners and to keep well away from the sixth son of his Lordship the Earl of Tyrone. I would indeed have been a poor stick if I had not picked up the flung gauntlet. I went my willful way until there came a night when *in flagrante delicto*, lip to lip, I was caught with Patrick in the light of a romantic moon. To Pat it meant no more than if he had kissed the pretty maid who dusted his room, and to me it meant even less, but there was no use trying to explain to the indignant female Holleys. That night in the

privacy of our boudoir Francis soundly slapped my face, and I, throwing caution to the winds, soundly slapped his face and what other portions of his anatomy I could lay hand on. Moreover I beat him with the sharp heel of my shoe and otherwise conducted myself like the common woman he accused me of being. After Francis had turned tail and fled, I locked the door and spent the rest of the night packing the sumptuous wardrobe I considered I had dearly earned. Before I walked for the last time down the Holley stair, I saw my plentitudinous luggage in the bowels of a common express wagon vanish down the drive toward the railroad station. Not too much did I trust Francis, his mamma or his frustrated sisters to send it after me. Neither my husband nor any member of his family turned up to wish me Godspeed, and I cannot say I blamed them. And as for Pat, he did not appear either, nor did I expect him, for the morning hours he generally spent sleeping off his potations of the night before.

"It was the Holley butler who called a public conveyance, a thing which I am sure he never did before in his life, and sent me on my way, but to my amazement at the railroad station Francis' father opened the door of my cab. At first blush I was sure he had come to urge me to return to the family portals, but he did nothing of the sort. He escorted me to the train, produced my tickets, installed me in the Pullman where he presented me with a sealed envelope, and apologized for the shortcomings of his son, assured me that, no less than Francis had failed me, had Francis failed him. He kissed me with dignity, wished me well, and in his tightly buttoned frock coat and top hat went away from me into the sizzling heat of an August morning. Within the year he was dead. In the envelope was five hundred dollars and a letter instructing me to call monthly for a similar sum on the Holley bankers in New York. I never did. I was grateful for the money my father-in-law gave me; still more was I grateful for his kindness; but before the gift was spent I was earning my own bread and butter with an occasional dab of jam.

"That was the year of 1892, the era of robber barons and tycoons, of diamond-studded corsets and gold-framed bicycles, of Diamond Jim and his Edna, of Lillian Russell and Jesse Lewisohn, of the Cherry Sisters, the roaring slapstick comedy of Weber and Fields, the dripping melodrama *Bertha, the Sewing-Machine Girl*. Of shopgirls who, earning five dollars a week, went clad in silks and velvets, of

chorines who lived in splendor, attended by retinues of servants, on salaries that would not have served to pay their carriage hire. An incredible era of fun, frolic and vulgarity, and one in which I was much more at home than any other in all my life.

"For no better reason than that I knew of no other place to go, I returned to the hotel where I had stayed with Francis. Though I paid only a fraction of the sum a room would cost today, I knew that unless I supplemented the Holley money with my own earnings, my stay there would be short. I am of tenacious character. Stephen had sown in me an ambition to sing and sing I would, but I did not know exactly how to make a beginning at it. Though my outward life was as decorous as a nun's, the fact that I lived alone at an expensive hotel, possessed a costly wardrobe and apparently ample funds gave me a decidedly equivocal status which in time brought contact with other young women whose status was also equivocal and rightly so. Among them was a girl named Cora, and it was Cora who was instrumental in enabling me to sing publicly and for money.

"Her protector, a kindly obese Bavarian, was proprietor of an immense and popular *Biergarten* in Yorkville. To please his Cora, he permitted me to sing heart-cracking ballads of Italy, France, Ireland, Scotland and other countries addicted to ballads. For three full months, in the company of yodelers, accordionists, dancers, performers on xylophones, and others of startling and peculiar artistry, I contributed to the entertainments of the *Biergarten*. And I might have kept on, if I had not become slightly tipsy, and for the amusement of Cora, her protector and various other shady ladies and gentlemen, clowned my ballads—with surprising results. There was present a person who had to do with New York's latest rage, 'French Vaudeville.' It was his suggestion that I appear for what he called a 'tryout' at Keith's Theater on Fourteenth Street, where presently I found myself on the empty stage burlesquing Lillian Russell singing '*La Cigale*.' A man in a dirty shirt and a dirtier hat played accompaniments for me on a tinny piano, taking copious drafts of beer from a pail as he strummed.

"For the next six months at vaudeville theaters in New York and adjacent cities I continued to burlesque Lillian, silly as it now seems, and Maggie Cline singing 'Throw 'Em Down, McCluskey,' Madame Nordica trilling 'Thou Art a Star.' And I imitated Marcella Sem-

brich, Nellie Melba and many artists whom I resembled neither vocally nor physically. Indeed in the crazy months that followed I seem to have imitated every female who ever opened her mouth to sing a note.

"Except what went to pay for board and lodging in Aunt Emma's second-rate theatrical boardinghouse on Forty-seventh Street, every penny I earned was spent for vocal instruction. Then magically I had more to spend. A better salary and better billing came when I worked out an act of my own, and it was the sole thing in my life for which I was indebted to Karl.

"In the old days there was a vinegarish teacher at the Etten school. To say Karl was no favorite of hers would be putting it mildly, and he in turn made her life a torment. There was a map stand on the dais beside her desk. In the top of it Karl screwed an eyelet, drew a length of cord through it, tied a fishhook to the other end. When his chance came he slyly fastened it into her long inside petticoat as she stood facing the blackboard, on the reverse side of the map stand. Karl slowly pulled the cord. The petticoat rose little by little until the convulsed class had a full view of high buttoned shoes, cotton stockings and open cambric drawers. It was on this prank I based my act. It was silly and very vulgar, but vulgarity was the rule rather than the exception in that lusty garish decade.

"I made my entrance in a trailing gown and huge feathered picture hat, carrying an ornate shepherd's crook much in the way a blind man carries his cane. Holding it stiffly at arm's length, I extended the other dramatically toward an unseen someone in an equally unseen garden and warbled Tosti's 'Goodbye' with all the stops out. After that I spread my billowing skirts over a piano bench and to my own accompaniment sang drippingly sentimental ballads.

"Though it was not so intended I am sure this part of the act was as ridiculous as the part that followed. It was a dreadful comedy routine which included my playing the piano with hands, elbows, and the heels of my shoes. Then as I stood with my back to the audience, tinkling some asinine doggerel, by trick wiring my skirts rose slowly, spread in an enormous circle, and never did sight of incredibly ornate shoes, roundabout striped hose and lacy drawers fail to bring down the house! To this day sight of a woman's drawers is good theater, though God knows why.

"It was a fantastic, incredible world in which I had come to live,

bounded on the north by Pabst Circle Café, on the south by 'Martin's,' on the east by 'Jack's,' the west by Guffanti's restaurant. Its bawdy heart was the Metropole Hotel of the Considine Brothers, which to the sporting confraternity was what Harry Hill's had been a scant decade before, rendezvous of racing men and gamblers, of prize fighters and jockeys, pimps, procurers and *femmes du pavé*, wiremen, shillabers and keepers of brothels; of Big Jack Thompson and Curley Dexter and Link Ludlum, of Ed Pierpont and his drunken Hattie, Nan Peterson and Caesar Young, of paunchy 'Jawn L.' and 'Gentleman Jim,' the laurels still fresh on his brow; of Rose Bara-tree, English May and Sue Macabee—Sweet Sue, one-time sweetheart of Harry Hill, now an aging madam of a port o' call under the same roof that housed Diamond Jim, the Rutledge Apartments, Broadway's last word in modernity.

"They are all dead, God rest them, but even in the bright days of the nineties, death had touched a little the lusty playboys and girls of the golden era. As the curtain descended on their show, that of another generation of actors and actresses, *bons vivants* and ladies of the boudoir arose. Of this newer galaxy of beaux and belles I wonder how many live to turn the pages of their lives and see what mad, bad creatures they once were. I know only of Pat Chaney and myself. Many times in my roaming about the world I have seen Patrick, Earl of Tyrone, and his countess, and never by word or look did we acknowledge the pungent interlude that had been ours.

"In 1896, as if by prearranged signal both Patrick and Francis came again into my life. It was the same year Flo Ziegfeld brought Anna Held to the United States, and in a play called *A Parlor Match* presented a new species of entertainment to the avid public. Immediately Weber and Fields burlesqued it in a show called *A Pair of Matches* or some such thing. As I remember, Cissy Fitzgerald played in it, and Connie Ediss, Lotta Gilson, Raymond Hitchcock and Weber and Fields themselves. And in the longest skirt with smallest waist, plumpest hips and breast ever known, Sari Santi played Anna Held—Sari Santi, erstwhile Katy Smith of vaudeville, Katherine Smith domestic servant, and Klara Schultz murderess. Anna did not like my mimicry of her, nor did the fatuously enamored Flo. They liked it still less when the next year Weber and Fields burlesqued her current play and Sari sang 'Oh, wun yoo coome and pla wix mee?' and 'I joost can't make my eeey's bee'ave' a great deal better than Anna sang them.

"One night during the show's run Francis walked unannounced into my dressing room and began a second and more frenzied courtship, and within a week I saw Patrick grinning at me from the first row. The ending of Francis' courtship is not a thing I delight to recall. On a winter night I fled from a raving, drunken man to drip blood over Pat Chaney's carpets and the clock of years had completed its circle many times before I left him again. Francis' bullet wrote 'Finis' to my association with Weber and Fields, and almost to my life. But I lived to sail out of New York Harbor with Patrick, and to roam the Continent with him absorbing languages as a sponge absorbs water, and, to lazy Pat's amusement, never for a moment ceasing to labor with my voice.

"In time we drifted to Paris. For the next two years I worked like a galley slave under the direction and instruction of Jean de Reszke. Then came the year 1898. Francis Holley died in a fever-ridden camp, no nearer to the Spanish-American War than Tampa, Florida. To my amazement I found he had left me every cent he had in the world, and as this was one-fourth of the Holley wealth, it was no inconsiderable sum.

"Time and time again Patrick pleaded with me to marry him, but, because of Francis, marriage had rotted in my gullet and left a bad taste in my mouth. Once only I would play the beggar maid, and though Pat's chances of inheriting fortune and title were exceedingly slim, he was a scion of the nobility and I wanted no more of my husband's family looking down the nose at me. Still, with a sizable fortune in my pocket, I confess to an occasional toying with the notion of becoming Mrs. Patrick Chaney, embryonic Countess of Tyrone, but I did not.

"Instead I went on working like one of the Furies under de Reszke. At the beginning of 1899 he sent me to sing at La Scala, filling another's boots it is true, but well enough to return to Paris in something of a triumph. If I had gained a career I had lost a lover. On the night I first sang the role of Louise under direction of Franz Vollmer at the Paris Opéra, I came home bearing my laurels to find that, bag and baggage, Patrick had walked out of my life. Not even to a career would Pat play second fiddle. In time his brothers, godly men all, went the way of the flesh, and his father too. Patrick, drunkard and rakehell of the family, hale and hearty, took unto himself a proper wife and, putting skylarking forever behind him, settled down

nobility, and so far as I know he still lives and flourishes. God bless him! He was a proper man.

"In 1900 Oscar Hammerstein gave me an audition and under contract I returned to the United States to sing at the Manhattan—I, Klara Schultz, who had fled terror-stricken down a country road only ten years before!

"Now and again the life of a gambler named Gordon had touched mine. He was a burly Canadian whom I liked and trusted and, aside from Francis' father, the sole person to whom I told the story of Klara Schultz. On my return to New York I met him again, no longer sponging a living from cards, but become a respectable businessman. It was he who told me of an advertisement that had persistently appeared in newspapers asking for information of the whereabouts or decease of Klara, daughter of Herman Schultz, late of the town of Van Etten, New York.

"The advertisements both interested and frightened me. After all the water that had run under bridges since that long-ago night, why should anyone want to know the whereabouts of Klara, unless they still cherished the ambition to see her hanged? But curiosity was stronger than fear. Gordon suggested that he go himself to the attorneys who had sponsored the notice, and I gladly agreed to let him. When he was unable to get anything out of them he proposed to go to Van Etten and make discreet inquiry as to persons interested in me. It was Gordon who brought the blessed news that Herman Schultz had not died on the night I ran away, but five years afterward.

"Now indeed I could boldly ask what was wanted of Klara Schultz, living or dead. To my amazement I found that for my good and benefit Stephen Mandrake had, before his death, established a certain trust which was to endure for ten years, then be dissolved and the principal paid to me. If I were dead at the end of this period the trust would still be dissolved and the money revert to Stephen himself, or, if he was dead, to his heirs.

"I neither needed nor wanted the money, but when I knew that if I could not establish a claim to it, Caroline would receive a generous portion, I determined, if need be, to fight her to the very death for it. But proving I was Klara Schultz was far from easy. Karl, Sophia and Jacob undoubtedly could identify me, but where were they?

"Karl in his ministerial capacity need not be too hard to find, but as

little as I wished Caroline to have Stephen's money, still less did I want Karl to have it. I had not a doubt in the world that if ever he knew my identity, he would force himself on me for the rest of my life and whine for assistance. On the other hand, it might take years to find either Sophia or Jacob. These things I told the attorney who, though he acted for Mandrake Estate, was clearly no friend of Caroline's.

"It was his suggestion I dictate to his secretary everything I could remember of Mandrake and its people, but the fact that I knew much of Mandrake House was not legal evidence that I was Klara Schultz. Caroline refused to accept it as such. It was only after months of bickering, when, confronting Caroline and Harry Phillips, I told of the hidden room and offered to lead the attorney to it, that Caroline capitulated. Then she reluctantly admitted I must be the missing Klara and signed a release for a tremendous sum of money. Not only was the original amount of the trust made accessible to me, but interest compounded for ten years as well.

"Except for Gordon there was no one whom I might call friend in the United States, and no more than a half-score people I knew at all. Europe had become much more my habitat than the land that had cradled me. So at the ending of the opera season I returned to Europe wearing a new name, for by due process of law I had assumed that of Mandrake, perhaps because I loved the dead Stephen, or because I still hated the living Caroline.

"For many years throughout the Continent Sari Mandrake sang, and then publicly she sang no more; there is nothing sadder than to outlive one's voice and one's contemporaries. Bessie Abbot was dead and Swedish Julia Clause, and Emmy Destine and Orville Harold. With them I had ridden the crest of the wave, and if ever I regretted my abrupt retirement I had only to recall the futile attempts of these older artists, after the wave had dashed against the cliffs of years, had only to consider my friends Stella Verlaine and Claire Monelle, their scores arranged and rearranged to cover time's inroads on their waning voices. I was of middle age. I had known plentiful success. With that I would be content, and while my laurels were still fresh and beautiful, lay them away in lavender.

"Money begets money. The fortune of Francis Holley and the fortune of Stephen Mandrake increased and multiplied, as did the not inconsiderable sum I had earned myself. Panic and depression

passed me by, and in time I came to be rated one of the wealthiest women in France. There was no want I might not gratify, no whim, however extravagant, I could not indulge.

"I have heard it said that if one lives overlong in any phase of life it becomes normal and usual. Perhaps this was the reason why in the years following my retirement my life seemed to me fitting and well ordered. Now with the clarity of perception given the dying, I know that for long enough my days were neither creditable or good, and the persons with whom I surrounded myself were in the main useless and undesirable. Since the debacle of 1939 I have read much of the disastrous influence that the Continental set had on European politics, and it is laughable to know there are many who consider this the truth. If such a thing as a Continental set existed then most surely I was of it! But the only thing ever I knew was a conglomeration of people who would have thought it less to their discredit to be caught in an act of immorality than in the wrong costume, in the wrong place or with the wrong people.

"In England I was familiar with those now reckoned to have been the Sleevland set and the Kingsley set; in France with those who formed the coteries of Countess Walgerie and Madame Polleau. I knew similar cliques in Italy, Spain and Germany. But never did I chance upon an individual or a group who had wit, fortitude or desire to speed or retard by a single jot the chariot race for power sweeping over Europe. Cliques and sets were formed of persons whose concern was pleasure and whose frantic migrations were in search of it. The adornment of their bodies absorbed them, and the satisfaction of their appetites, whether it was for food or drink, of male for female, or the erotic fusing of like with like. People of importance to no one but themselves, the stinking backwash of the First World War. May the gods never again look upon their like!

"By these dubious years and ways Sari Mandrake came to the year of 1936 and the knowledge that for the remainder of her life she was to walk hand in hand with fear and suffering. Of the many persons she knew there were only four in whom she might confide and find sympathy and understanding: Franz Vollmer, for decades the musical ringmaster of Europe, now a dropsical hulk living out painful days between bed and invalid chair; Claire Monelle, caricature of what she had once been, her voice long vanished, soaked in absinthe and frustration, hidden away in a tiny villa at Passy; Ellen Meadows, the

woman to whom Sari had given a new name and a new life, and who for reasons which seemed justifiable to Ellen, if not to the British Commonwealth, had killed her father and thereafter had looked on the world through the gloomy windows of a prison; and Peter Petralsky, whose book of life was as mottled as ever was Ellen's or Sari's own."

Peter coughed from behind polite fingers, and I paused and glanced at him.

"May I clarify Madam's statement a bit, sir?" he asked. When I nodded, he said in manner and diction of a statesman addressing an assembly, "Perhaps you've heard of my father, sir. He was Anton Pertacouski, the revolutionist who was killed in the Polish uprising of 1897. I somewhat simplified the name when I became an American citizen, sir. I shan't trouble you with the details of my life, sir, but my mother managed to gather money for our passage and, when I was at eleven years, brought me with her to her brother in Chicago. Because I did not understand English and must earn my own way, I was a bit late with my education, sir, and before I'd completed my second year at medical college I was twenty-six years old. I was not interested in Poland, sir. I'm afraid I have not the temperament necessary for political enterprise, but I'd promised my mother I would visit my homeland, and in 1921, the year following her death, I sailed for Europe with that intent."

At this point Peter's calm demeanour began to disintegrate. I assured him if what he was about to reveal was painful to him there was no necessity for him to go on, but Peter persisted in embracing his Gethsemane.

"I was a young man, sir, and I believe was considered somewhat wild."

I choked back a guffaw, for not by broadest conjecture could I envision Peter Petralsky as being "somewhat wild," but I did not interrupt.

Peter went on: "My father was legendary to Polish patriots in the United States, sir, and their various organizations selected his son as a trustworthy messenger to carry a great sum of money, in specie, for the furthering of some Polish project. I'm sure I do not know why the money was not transferred in the usual manner, sir. There was a great deal of secrecy about the affair and no doubt it was necessary.

"En voyage I made friends with some wealthy young gentlemen travelling for their pleasure and though I had not intended anything of the sort, at their insistence I went along with them to Paris and thence to Monte Carlo. To be concise, sir, within a fortnight over the gaming table I had squandered a great portion of the money entrusted to me. On the first day Madam Mandrake spoke to me I purchased a banker's cheque with what remained, inclosed my confession with it, addressed it to the person whom I had expected to reach in Poland, and then with a small sum returned to the Casino, hoping to retrieve what I had misappropriated. Of course I did not.

"I had seen Madam at the tables quite frequently, sir, but frankly she had seemed no more than one of the rich, gay women past their youth who were forever about. When my money was gone I left the rooms and turned back towards my hotel, and, I assure you, sir, to make life last as long as possible I went as slowly as ever I could. I dropped the envelope containing my confession and cheque into the hotel posting box, went to my room, drew a revolver from my portmanteau and lay down on the bed. But before I had mustered courage to pull the trigger, sir, someone snatched it from my hand and I saw Madam Mandrake standing beside me. I was not pleased, sir, and I'm sorry to say I was very brusque. Madam turned on me and, in the most incredible profanity ever I heard in my life, cursed me for a poltroon and a coward. She caused me to be very angry, sir, and I strove to regain possession of the revolver, but she tossed it over my head and through the window. When I heard the sound of shattering glass and the gun striking the courtyard below, I went all to bits, sir. Indeed I believe I sat down on the bed and wept.

"Madam quickly had the story out of me and also my promise I would do nothing further in the line of destroying myself. Then she went away and wheedled someone into retrieving my letter from the posting box, and, again to be concise, sir, she saw to it the following day I was on my way to Poland carrying the full amount which had been entrusted to me. She did not know me from Adam, sir, and the tale I told might very well have been a fabrication, but she trusted me and I do not believe she ever regretted doing so.

"When I had completed my mission I returned to Monte Carlo and never did I leave Madam again. Money meant nothing to her. I have known her in a single night to gamble away five times the

as she scattered grain for pigeons, she parted with money, sir, and always it came pouring back to her tenfold. Time and again Madam sought to persuade me to return to my studies, but I could not bear life apart from her. I worshipped her, sir."

Peter Petralsky faltered, his face crumpled, and tears scattered on the vast expanse of linen covering his chest. Ellen reached out a birdlike claw and laid it comfortingly on his huge knee, and then she also asked permission to speak tribute to Sarah Mandrake. Standing beside her chair she folded her hands about her midriff and said primly:

"The day I was sent away to be incarcerated, sir, I went dead all over, sir. I did what was bidden me to do. I ate, and I slept, but I tell you truly, sir, I was like the dead. I had not meant to kill my father, but he came at me in anger like a tiger, sir, and in fright I flung the meat axe and struck him down at my feet. I received a life sentence in prison, sir, but a kind lady in the neighbourhood where I lived so concerned herself on my behalf that after ten years I was given the King's pardon, and I'm sure it was a great honour, sir, but somehow I didn't seem to care about it as I should.

"The lady saw to it I was sent to a pleasant situation in Yorkshire, but I went forever fearful lest I be found out and shunned. I really was in quite a bad way, sir, when Madam came to visit at the house where I was employed. She was between maids, so to speak, and I was told off to do for her. She was most jolly, sir, and generous no end, but I didn't fancy her offhand way with servants. I didn't think it was fitting, and then one night my bell rang and I found Madam took down bad. I think it was the very beginning of her illness. She told me what to do for her and I did it as well as I could, though her condition really quite frightened me, sir.

"Somehow Madam got the story of my father and the prison out of me, sir, and she wasn't 'orrified at all. She told me about going for so long thinking she'd done in her own father, and she said we were birds of a feather, if you'll pardon my saying such a thing, the difference being I was caught out and she was not. It put a different face on things and I got more self-respecting, as you might say, sir. I think the very first time I wept since I was incarcerated was when Madam asked me if I'd fancy doing for her permanent. I've been in attendance on her ever since—I think it's twenty-three years come Easter."

"We travelled a good bit, sir, and Madam didn't fancy the passport given me by the British government. You see, it made mention of my being in prison, or something of the sort, and Madam thought it most unfair. I'm sure I don't know how she arranged for the Ellen Meadows passport, sir, but before ever she took me from England she did, and it's odd, sir, how quickly I began to think I really *was* Ellen Meadows.

"When this murder thing came up at Mandrake and I told Mr. Froste about the passport, Madam was 'orrified and she was 'orrified again when she found I'd kept my prison papers lying about. You see, sir, there are times when I'm inclined to get a bit above myself and I kept them handy-like to make me remember misfortune and be 'umbler, as you might say, sir."

"What became of them, Ellen?"

"They are destroyed, sir. Madam burnt them herself on the 'earth upstairs, but for a time they were mislaid and I must say 'twas most upsetting, sir."

For a moment Ellen hesitated, and then went determinedly on: "Peter wished to court me, sir, and I thought it only fair he should know about the prison, but somehow I couldn't find proper words to tell him, so at last I gave him the papers that he might read for himself, sir. After the woman's body had been come upon, sir, and Madam found I still had the prison records, she bade me fetch them at once. When I asked Peter for them he was in great trouble at mislaying them, sir."

"They turned up again, did they not?"

"Oh, yes, sir, Peter found they'd got mixed with the house papers."

I cocked an eye at Peter who, glancing at Ellen, appeared acutely unhappy. "I'd like to explain, sir, to you and perhaps to Ellen too," he said. "Our rooms had been twice searched, and I was most apprehensive that something would go wrong another time and I'd be asked to open my boxes. I thought it would be well to secrete my papers and Ellen's also in a place where they would be least likely to be come upon, sir. And quite by accident, finding the odd construction of the buhl table and it being, so to speak, almost within eyeshot the day long, I taped Ellen's papers at the rear of one drawer and my own at the rear of the other. I heard the commotion on the evening the nursing person shattered the table, sir, and a bit later saw you take a packet from the drawer and carry it with you into the library.

"That night I returned to the house and found it was Ellen's papers you chanced upon. For the present there was nothing to be done about them, so I waited until you left your key-ring lying about, and opening the drawer I took Ellen's records from it. I hope you'll forgive me, sir. I was in a great quandary what to do, but I decided my first duty lay with Madam. I carried the records to her, sir, and saw her destroy them. I never told Ellen what happened. There seemed little use in upsetting her as well as myself."

I sighed. "I wish I'd never found the damn things," I said. "They gave me some bad moments. There were times when I expected to have Ellen murder me in my bed."

"I'm sure I would not think of such a thing, sir," said Ellen primly and both Froste and Vanningham guffawed, but I apologized for my gaff and went back to my reading.

"As soon as Ellen came to me," wrote Madam Mandrake, "I decided to endow her with a new identity and a new name, and for one who had no need to consider expenditures, this was easy to accomplish. An American named Ellen Meadows had died in a London hospital. Her passport by some devious and dishonest route had come into the hands of a trickster. Many of the passports he dealt in were altogether fraudulent, others stolen were altered to fit new identities, and still others, as in the case of the dead American, secured from hospital attendants.

"The physical description of Ellen Meadows might well have been that of Daisy Skelton. Even the dreadful passport picture looked like her, and so I traded a bundle of banknotes for it and felt no scruple, for Ellen Meadows had no need for it in her journey across the Styx.

"May 3rd.

"My dear Stephen:

"Again I have been ill, so ill it is almost a miracle I have lived to see one of Mandrake blood master of Mandrake House. But God has been kind. Today I sat at my window as you walked the terrace and for a little stood smoking your pipe at the cliff's edge. The task to which I set heart and hand is done and I defy Caroline or the Devil himself to undo it. Three days ago I saw you sitting in the motorcar at Mandrake's door, with your wife and your son, saw you alight and go toward the threshold, but alas! I could not see you

cross it unless I leaned my body over the window sill, and to have the ghost of a dead woman dangling above your head would be a strange welcome to the house.

"I have no fear of Caroline or her devilish tricks, but fearing for you the night you came to Mandrake I told Peter to see to it that the candles which Jacob molds were kept alight to protect you. Long ago my mother solemnly told us they were shield and buckler against the power of evil, and in my time at Mandrake I have come to know Caroline and her devils will indeed shun their light. More than once when I have touched match to candle she has vanished.

"Have you wondered why I returned to Mandrake, Stephen? In Paris my house had an odd three-cornered gable room reached only by an ornate metal stair leading upward from my bedroom. I never knew for what purpose the gable was intended, but after I purchased the house I saw to it that windows were let into all three sides, and there I felt like Sister Anne, the Lady of Shalott and other females given to watching from high windows.

"Far removed from the activities of the house, the odd room had quietude and character, and there I retired to study, make music or merely to invite my soul. In the week after the verdict of death it was the only place in which I found peace, but even there I could arrive at no decision how best to live out the little time left to me. I could not bear to remain in Paris, but where to turn I did not know, and in such indecision came to the month of April. One morning I sat beside the gable window looking with all-unseeing eyes at the newly green grass and budding chestnut trees of the Champs Élysées, trying to remember a pleasant corner of earth where, hidden away from pitying or curious eyes, I might, with what dignity was left me, die. And on this morning began the fantasy which from that day to this has kept me company.

"Clearly against the sky I saw a yellow house set in the midst of broad green lawns, saw a terrace shadowed by trees and beyond the trees a wide, rushing river. It was familiar and unfamiliar, a place well remembered and one which might have been well forgotten. As I sat spellbound, watching the incredible mirage, the house door opened and a man sauntered out, a pair of tawny dogs gamboling at his feet, and with hands thrust into his pockets, smoke curling from his pipe, stood gazing at the river. Then turning, he went back into the house, and house, lawns, trees and river vanished. There was only

the bright blue sky and the trees before my eyes. I said aloud, 'I've gone mad,' and sat cradling my face in my hands, weeping bitterly, repeating over and over, 'I'm mad, I'm mad.' For days on end I made sly tests of my sanity on Peter and Ellen and whoever else crossed my path. Twice I saw the yellow house, the trees, lawns, terrace and the rushing river, and each time man and dogs sauntered out, stood for a few moments and then vanished.

"But the third time the yellow house was transposed above the trees, the man turned toward me, smiled and raised an arm in a familiar gesture of salutation. And then the vision came no more. As well as I knew my own I knew the man's face, yet I did not recall his name nor did I remember where I had seen the house. Frightened, I went again to my doctor and told him the incredible story, and he had no more answer to the hallucinations than I. Weeks passed and almost I convinced myself there had been no house, nor man, nor dogs nor river, and no sooner had I reached this frame of mind when suddenly I remembered Mandrake, remembered Stephen and, as well as if he had told me, knew it was in that place I would die. Having this decided for me I was calm and almost happy.

"Between New York Harbor and New York Harbor lay over thirty years. I did not know whether one brick of Mandrake House stood on another, but in time I made a pilgrimage to Van Etten and found Mandrake desolate. There was a weather-beaten "For Sale" placard hanging askew on the rusty gates, and to the name painted on it I presented myself. If I had proposed to purchase the topmost crag of the Catskill Mountains, the director of the bank in charge of Mandrake could not have been more astonished. Why anyone should wish to own a ramshackle old house, its few remaining fields a tangle of brier and tare, its woods gloomy with neglect, was beyond reasonable conjecture. But shortly Mandrake was mine for a sum so small I felt as if I had purchased the Holy Grail for a five-pound note.

"Mandrake's stout pillars were standing as they had always stood, but the brave iron banner was no more. In its place a circle of rotted wood held undecipherable words, the gate screamed on rusty hinges and the lane beyond was rank with growth, fouled by rotten wood. There was only a stump of the willow tree on the hilltop where Klara crouched in terror on a long-ago night. Where the lonely swamp had once been were flimsy little houses perched on awkward pillars like infant cranes on newly discovered legs. But the haunted hill was

there still and the dismal quarry and Van Etten inn stood white and lonely in the summer sun, and the town was much as it had once been.

"And so did the ghost of the girl Klara Schultz return to her native heath, and found in the withered faces of men and women on its streets traces of boys and girls who had sat with her on the hard benches of the Jehovian Brotherhood church, or in the village school. But they found nothing at all familiar in the foreign woman strangely come among them, and the only person who knew her was the shambling idiot Hazeltine.

"*May 19th.* I have written something of the fantasy which began in Paris with the vision of Stephen and Mandrake House. For a time it was held in abeyance, but on the summer day I stepped over the threshold of Mandrake it began again. It has not ceased, and I know it will never cease until I am dead. The grime of years lay thick in the hall as Peter opened the door, curtains hung in shreds against the dirty panes, and dust stretched in incredible webs from mantelpiece and chandelier and from the great curved banister of the stairs. I knew it would be like this and was not dismayed. But the gibbering obscene woman who met me at the threshold and went before me through the house did indeed dismay me. I am not mad as I write of this thing. I am as sane as ever I was in my life, and never have I been one given to chimeras. I only pray, my dear Stephen, that you have not seen and never will see the phantom of Caroline Mandrake or, if you do, will not permit fear to drive you from this house.

"I was not too comfortably situated at Van Etten Inn. When Peter suggested I have the south addition made livable and from close quarters supervise the rehabilitation of Mandrake Estate, I accepted his suggestion gladly. All the summer workmen swarmed about, literally accomplishing miracles, and by early autumn house and grounds were well on the way toward completion. Suddenly I had an urge to move into the main house. I insisted that workmen be concentrated there, and I gave those in charge of the restoration of Mandrake no peace until it was made ready.

"On the afternoon when for the first time, and very happily, I sat at tea in the long drawing room, I heard the outer door open, and as visible as ever I saw him in my life Stephen Mandrake came into the

room, tossed hat and whip on a convenient chair and, crossing the room, stood with an elbow on the mantel, a hand in his pocket, smiling down on me as so often I had seen him smile from the same position in the stone cottage long ago. From that day to this he has never left me. At times he is wholly visible and at other times is not; nevertheless I am always conscious of his protective presence. He does not speak nor do I believe those returned from death to life have power to speak. But as clearly as if he had voiced them, it has been given me to know his thoughts, wishes and desires. And so it was I knew on that my first night as mistress of Mandrake House, its master would sit at table with me in the room where once I had stood humbly and timidly beside the chair of the woman who bore his name and his utmost dislike. Often since, I have wondered what Peter made of my orders on that day, to cover Mandrake's table with my most priceless cloth, to place upon it the ancient crested silver that your wife has come to prize, to deck it with the Gloire de Dijon roses Stephen so loved. Perhaps Peter merely thought it the whim of an ailing old woman. If he thought me mad he made no sign, but did as I told him to do. That night Stephen Mandrake, clad in the formal clothing of a half-century ago, walked after me into Mandrake's dining room, sat opposite at the table and lifted his glass in a toast welcoming me back to Mandrake House. Again, Stephen, I beg you not to think me mad when I write that in everything but flesh Stephen has walked with me in sunshine, sat with me at table and beside me at the hearth, matched his stride with mine to pace the terrace, and as he made me music years ago in the stone cottage, he has made it for me on Sarah Gresham's harpsichord. Many times Caroline and the dreadful things which come with her have attempted to molest us, but we are stronger than she, strong as once we were not.

"After Stephen died Caroline razed the ell he had built for his own use, but strangely she did not destroy its furnishings. When workmen began the modernization of the attic they came upon chests and chairs and a bed which I knew to be Stephen's. Polished and handsome, I saw to it they were placed in the room which in my time at Mandrake had been known as the Bride's Room, and which I intended for my own use. The first night I lay in Stephen's bed Caroline tried to kill my body. I saw her evil face peering at me maliciously as the ceiling beam hung suspended over my head. I am sure Caroline hates me as she hates this house, hates Stephen and

is determined none of his blood shall live here. But this thing has come to pass and I depend upon you, Stephen, to be stalwart against this evil spirit and her cohorts.

"I do not mean to imply that Caroline has constantly menaced me or that Stephen has constantly protected me. There were long and lovely periods when Mandrake was as normal and peaceful as any house on earth. But again would come days and nights of utter violence when the house trembled on its foundations and held within it indescribable malice and fury. Among Stephen's books were his many diaries. I am certain that if in life Caroline had known of their existence, she would have destroyed them, for written into them for all who are clever enough to decipher was the record of her faithlessness. In them Stephen had written also of his love for me, of Caroline's threats against us both. In the last entry made under an October date in the year he died, he had said, 'This day I have completed arrangements for the trust, and nothing shall deter me from spending the remainder of my life with Klara.' I saw to it that Stephen's papers and many of his diaries would be given you, Stephen, but the pages in which he wrote of his love for me shall go with me into my grave.

"June 5th. No longer have I strength to move freely about, but I do not suffer overmuch. Indeed there are times when I do not suffer at all. Have you considered why I chose you to live after me at Mandrake, Stephen? Your coming was part of the fantasy of which I have written. I know it will interest you.

"When Mandrake had been fully restored, the problem came up of its disposal after I had ceased to have use for it. I decided to present the house and land to Dutchess County, as so many of the older estates have been presented to the State of New York, but to be quite sure it would be accepted and cared for, I planned to create an endowment trust to maintain it. Had you seen fit to refuse the terms of my will Mandrake would have become in effect a memorial to the Mandrake family and a museum of the centuries which have elapsed since it was brought into being.

"In the two weeks before the holidays I outlined what I wished to have done, called Benjamin Froste to Mandrake, gave him the memorandum and asked him to attend to the business as speedily as he could. For the first time in many years I was alone at Christmas, but I was not lonely, for I was never more conscious of Stephen's presence. I

had given the servants permission for a Christmas party in the newly completed attic, and as I sat beside my fire listening to the muted sounds from upstairs, I became again conscious of a harsh singing vibration throughout the house. I am not a timid woman, but no human being could live unafraid and unaffected by the terrors which all too often beset Mandrake. I crossed to Peter's bell and tugged violently at the cord. He did not come and he did not come, and when I could no longer endure my fear, I opened the door into the hall and immediately was immersed in a vapor so dense it was almost impossible to draw breath, and altogether impossible to see beyond arm's length. With might and main I sought to scream, but the sound from my poor throat could not be heard a dozen feet away. Then suddenly I saw Caroline grimacing at me through the malodorous mist. Her clutching fingers reached toward me. Stephen—his dogs racing beside him—came hastily up the stairs, the same dogs that long ago I had seen lying stark and cold in Mandrake kennels, poisoned by an 'unknown person,' though every soul in Mandrake House knew it was the work of Caroline, Harry Phillips or both.

"Ellen found me unconscious, and when Peter's usual ministrations failed, they called Jacob from the Christmas party to ask what he knew of local physicians. Jacob called Dr. Vanningham."

Vanningham glanced at Jacob. "So you are the guy who got me into this business, Jake," he said facetiously. "O.K., wait until you need me sometime. I'll fix you up pretty." And to Jacob's muttered reply he could die without help from quack doctors, Vanningham answered only with a wry smile, but arose, poured a generous tot of brandy and stood with arm draped over the manteltree.

"You know all this table-turning and ghost hocus-pocus leaves me cold," he said. "But I'll have to admit there was something damn queer about the section of country between Scarletville and the main highway. The stretch is lousy with game, but you couldn't pay one of the folks around here to hunt over it, and believe it or not, nobody at all seems able to live on the three farms that make up the section. I'll bet they changed hands twenty times between the days when I was a kid and the time they were abandoned altogether.

"You take that Christmas Eve Steve's just read about. There was the damnedest feeling in the house, and I'll tell you right now I wanted out—*bad*—seemed like there was folks whispering all over

the place, and Peter kept popping in and out and Ellen sneaking around tippy-toe. Believe you me, by the time I got away from Mandrake I was jittery as hell, but I fixed the old lady up well and after that I came whenever she needed me. Liked her fine—dying by inches and making a joke of it. But just the same there were a lot of things about the place I didn't get. It didn't take long to find out Peter knew a damned sight more about medicine than a layman has any right to know, and to have a butler sounding off like the A.M.A. didn't make any kind of sense.

"I wondered if maybe the old lady wasn't a prisoner, and Peter and Ellen were trying to kill her off. I began to ask sort of leading questions, and I think Madam Mandrake got my drift, because for a while she kidded the pants off me, and then told me all about Peter and Ellen."

Vanningham slouched back to his chair and again spread his long legs towards the fire. "Well, I've spoken my little piece, Steve. Get on with your reading," he said, and turning again to the pages spread before me, I "got on" with it.

"Benjamin Froste returned to Mandrake a week after my illness of Christmas Eve," wrote Madam Mandrake. "Peter, considering I was too ill to receive him, did not tell me when he came. He left the draft of the will for me and went back to New York. That night Stephen Mandrake came into my room carrying with him one of his own diaries. He traced with shadowy finger what he had long ago written of Betsy Van Etten's marriage to Frederick Ellers, and then, leaving the diary open face-downward on the bed, went away. I knew nothing in the world of Betsy Van Etten, but I determined to find out what I could. In spite of Peter's protests I recalled Froste to Mandrake and set in motion the machinery which in time brought Betsy's grandson to Mandrake House."

For the first time Froste interrupted the reading. "Like Vanningham here I've never had much time for ghosts, but if ever a man had ghosts thrust down his craw, I'm that man. When Peter telephoned that I was wanted in a hurry at Mandrake, I thought the old lady's condition had turned worse. I caught the next train back, got here about eleven o'clock at night and so did not see her until the following morning.

"She was still in bed. After she got through talking I wondered if her mind was O.K. She'd taken a good deal of trouble with the first will, and so had I taken a good deal of trouble with it, but now she wanted to toss the whole thing overboard and begin a wild-geese chase for someone called Betsy Ellers. If I couldn't find Betsy, I must locate her family. And to make matters all nice and cosy she told me Betsy lived in England. Before I had a chance to explain what a tough job it was going to be, she handed me a list of British officials in Washington who she said would be glad to assist. To make a long story short, I lit out for Washington, sent a letter she'd given me to the Embassy, and within the hour had a call from them asking me to come around. After that everything was easy sailing. About a month later the Embassy forwarded me a package and I brought it to Mandrake. It had complete data not only of Betsy, but also on her sister Fanny, photographs of them and of their three sons. I decided maybe Madam wasn't so touched in the head as I thought.

"To boil things down, she looked the pictures over, picked one and held it alongside a picture she'd had made of the painting in the dining room. It might have been the same man. When I went back to New York the next day I had the skeleton of the best damn will I ever drew in my life. There wasn't a single loophole anywhere. No wonder she had gobs of money. That woman had a head on her shoulders."

I waited for Froste to continue, but he said nothing further and I returned to my reading.

"After I had seen your photograph, Stephen," wrote Sarah Mandrake, "I set about preparations to bring you to Mandrake, but all at once war broke over Europe and my fine schemes went awry. You were sent into service with the Flying Corps and I was tormented with fear lest adverse fortune come to you. In the fall of the second year came word of your accident and the possibility of your retirement, and my hope of seeing you at Mandrake flamed again. But I was now unable to speak aloud. I had become a trembling, raddled old woman, and I did not wish a boy like you to associate such as I with Mandrake House. For all that I was obsessed to see with my own eyes one who so much resembled Stephen Mandrake installed as master of Mandrake House. In this obsession was born the plan to anticipate death by a little. I laid before Ellen and Peter a carefully concocted

scheme. Its success or failure would lie wholly with them. If I had demanded they quaff the hemlock it would have pleased them better than the thing I did demand—that by chicanery and guile to all intents and purpose they help Sarah Mandrake to die.

“At first I meant merely to hide away in the north addition, to permit you, Stephen, to believe I had been forced to go on a journey and when the time of death approached, to simulate return. But this plan had too many fairly impossible features and so, though I had already had the upper room of the north addition facing the house refurnished to my satisfaction, I set about searching for the room which I knew to be hidden among the eaves. The portrait of Caroline had been reframed and rehung. Ellen, Peter and I fingered every inch of the frame but the ‘Open Sesame’ eluded us. When the portrait did swing on its hidden groove, this room was well on the way toward completion, for I had come upon the second stairway leading upward behind the paneling in the north addition.

“Step by step Peter went before me, trying the stairs with his weight, and Ellen came timidly after, until at last we three stood with the undisturbed dust of many a year swirling about our flickering lights, and I was no longer Sarah Mandrake but frightened Klara Schultz peering over her candle flame at a mystery. But the mystery had become only a dreary room shrouded in dust and rags and rotted draperies. The blackened ash on its hearth bore the countless foot-prints of the rats hidden away in its cubbies.

“The myriad clocks which once had ticked so eerily still stood among the flotsam and jetsam of years, their hands pointing to their death hour, perhaps awaiting Harry’s ghostly hand to set them again into a weird cacophony.

“To the delighted astonishment of the house servants they were given their salary and three months’ holiday, and in order that Peter might not be hampered in his labors, with Ellen to attend me I again went to live in the south addition. The means Peter used to make this room habitable and handsome are too many and particular to set down, but all summer long he worked, cleaning, repairing, restoring, hiding with infinite care the electric wires and the telephone which connects this room with Peter’s in the north addition—the telephone concealed in an asbestos-lined cubby of the chimney.

“The space between the roof and the ceiling he packed with insulating material. He made ready the double windows to be installed

when bitter weather came, saw to it chimney and hearth were staunch and usable, set in place the electric heaters on which in time to come I must partially depend for warmth, and set in place also the huge electric fans to cool the room if I lived beyond the spring. It was Peter who distempered walls, painted, carpeted, and hung bright draperies at the windows and door. By what miracle he brought furniture up the narrow stairs I do not know unless it was piecemeal and he assembled them above.

"At the beginning of September I went with him to the attic and found the room bright with color, gay with chintz and silks and homey with the familiar things which I had told Ellen to carry there—a copy of Stephen's portrait which hung over the dining-room mantel shelf, a silver-framed picture of Stephen Ellers, a tiny radio and long rows of books set into vermilion shelving, the gold clock given me by Franz Vollmer the first night I sang *Louise*, my silver and china tea service, a silk cover for my bed, a hearth rug of soft white fur, a velvet blanket for the couch, a parade of ebony elephants to march across the mantel's length, vases of crimson and cobalt crystal which, in the lonely days stretching before me, would hold whatever flowers Peter could manage, to gladden my hideaway.

"So, much in the manner of a Chinese gentleman preparing for his journey to the seventh celestial heaven, did Sarah Mandrake prepare for her death in life, seeing to it the hidden room became as familiar to her as other rooms in Mandrake House. As she stood at its window gazing on the magic sweep of river, or beside its cheerful hearth fire, she knew she had indeed chosen wisely and well the place in which for a little she was to live, and then to die.

"Came the Eve of All Hallows, a crisp, sparkling day which long ago would have found little Klara dancing in the wind, her pigtailed streaming out from her funny little head, or the older Klara with hair whipped into a Medusa crown, shivering in her flimsy coat, waiting at the cliff's edge for her lover.

"The afternoon sun was high when, leaning on Peter's arm, in the light of day I walked the terrace for the last time. Ellen lined a longue chair with blankets, and after Peter left us, lingered for a little tucking them about my feet, wrapping the shawl more closely over my shoulders, seeing to it that book and reading glasses were near at hand on the table. Then reluctantly Ellen too went away, though neither she nor Peter knew this was the day Sarah Man-

drake had chosen to die. For a long time she sat watching the river wind-whipped into gray-green fury, the crackling leaves drift over lawn and terrace, sat until pinpricks of light gleamed in the sky and in the windows of little houses across the river. Then loosing her blankets she drew the shawl closely about her and went laboriously down the steep cliff stair. When she came to the river she cast into it a few tokens of her living. Then, shivering and struggling for breath, she went quickly up the path she had descended. She need not have hurried or been afraid of discovery, for only wild geese in southward flight, stars and the whistling wind witnessed the thing which she had done. And so *requiescat in pace* Sarah Mandrake.

"The Eye of All Hallows, 1944.

"My dear Stephen:

"One year ago today I ascended to this room expecting at best to live a few months. I am still alive and in one of the oddest circumstances ever a woman found herself, for in many ways my well-laid plans have gone astray. I had thought that on your arrival in the United States you would come directly to Mandrake House, for a short time I would dwell under the same roof with you, and then, knowing the thing I had set hand to had been accomplished, would peacefully die. Never at all did I think I would live beyond the spring.

"Perhaps it was my curtailed activity that brought a new lease of life, for throughout the winter I had greater ease from pain than in the year before. I was neither lonely nor bored, for I had Peter and Ellen, my books and radio, for companionship and interest. Against your coming an adequate staff had been maintained at Mandrake House. Not one of them suspected I was hidden under the roof. Peter saw to it that Ellen's food and his own were carried to the north addition, and that the amount was ample for all of our needs. Besides this, Peter had installed in the passage outside my room various electrical contrivances for Ellen to boil my kettle, brown crisp toast, and after your coming prepare all of the little nourishment I require. I have been comfortable and in an odd fashion even happy. Nevertheless had I known the long months I must remain hidden, I doubt if I would have had the hardihood to attempt the farce I have perpetrated.

"On the night I vanished, Peter, in accordance with oft-repeated instructions, summoned the state police. They searched assiduously

for Sarah Mandrake and found only her shawl on the riverbank, her kerchief and shoe drifting with the tide, a letter telling of her intent to die.

"Benjamin Froste, notified of my death, came immediately to Mandrake, and I, chuckling at the window of my hide-out, saw him lugubriously supervise dragging the river for my entirely nonexistent corpse."

Froste mumbled and I halted, awaiting what he had to say, but he said nothing at all and I went on with my reading.

"It was not feasible for Ellen to absent herself on the night of my pseudo-death. So I boiled my kettle, brewed tea and ate the food Ellen hastily brought, and then, tired with the business of drowning myself, went early to my bed and almost immediately to sleep.

"My golden clock chimed softly, struck three times. Before the last stroke was done I awakened. After a bit I lighted the lamp at my bedside and, as I had so often done on wakeful nights, settled over a book. I do not know how long I read or when I first became conscious the room was changing. Before my eyes draperies Peter had hung at the windows merged into the misty blue fabric which had covered them fifty years before. As then, two couches stood side by side at the hearth, and on one lay a naked woman, her head dangling in dreadful upside-down fashion over the edge, her eyes staring, her mouth grinning derisively. For seeming eons I could not tear my eyes from the dreadful sight. Then slowly the wraith faded and altogether vanished.

"Many times since that night Caroline Mandrake has come into this room, but Stephen comes too, and I am not afraid.

"*November 5th.* Guy Fawkes Day, which all good Britons commemorate as the day on which the Popish Plot to blow up their seat of government was foiled, and there is nothing good Britons celebrate so lustily as anything to which the misnomer 'Popish Plot' may be applied. Today as my brother Jacob swept the terrace free of leaves, I would have greatly liked to go down from this room, tuck my hand under his arm, and chat with him as I did when I was his sister Klara. But between one long-gone day and another, Klara died in the darkness of a country lane and her resurrection would be of scant use or

pleasure to anyone. What I may do for Jacob I have done. Already he lives at ease in the stone cottage which meant much to me and to Stephen, and knowing his life long he will not want for anything money can buy, I am comforted and strangely comforted also to sit here quietly and behold him industriously sweeping away the leaves.

"November 7th. After I had nostalgically written of Jacob, something occurred which almost tumbled my secret castle about my ears, and this entirely because of my own foolishness.

"Since you crossed Mandrake's threshold, Stephen, as well as might be, I delightedly shared your life, and when I knew Kate was to bear a child I became almost maudlin that one of the Mandrake blood would be born in this house which for so very long has harbored no child at all. When the baby was born I suffered no less than you yourself suffered, and when Ellen came at dawn to tell me all was well, I was as grateful to a kindly God as ever you were.

"From the moment I knew you had called the child Sarah, I was obsessed with a desire to see it, to hold it in my arms. Yet I did not dare go down in the hours of darkness, lest I again encounter you as I did on the lone occasion when for no purpose whatever I ventured again into Mandrake House. I do not believe you saw me, Stephen. The hall was unlighted. Nevertheless before I closed the portrait behind me, for a breathless moment I stood within your arm's length.

"On the night your child so dreadfully vanished, Ellen took her from her crib and, because you slept in the Caroline suite, carried her down the rear stairs, through the passageway to my room. It's a lovely baby, Stephen, the loveliest I've ever seen. I think she knew her coming was a lark, for she smiled knowingly and gurgled mischievously. Only for a little did I hold her in my arms, then reluctantly gave her to Ellen who set out to return almost immediately, terror-stricken that the baby's absence had been discovered.

"I rang Peter's telephone, and when he did not answer, realized he would be called to assist in searching for the missing child, and we would have to manage for ourselves.

"I told Ellen to wrap Sarah in my shawl, carry her to the passageway, lay her on the floor just within the portrait, and then go at once into the house, wait for a time when the suite was free of people, open the portrait and quickly place the child on the bed; or, if it were possible, to restore her to her crib. Unfortunately it was long hours

before Ellen was able to do as she was bidden, and not once did your daughter cry or in any way reveal the secret of her hiding place. At last Ellen managed to snatch the baby and lay her on the bed, but no sooner had she done so when she heard ascending footsteps. If she had delayed a single instant in closing the portrait after her, the secret passage and hidden stairs would have been discovered, and I can think of nothing more humiliating than willy-nilly to be resurrected from the dead. Fortunately I was *not* discovered, nor did the child take harm from her excursioning, and so all's well that ends well.

"November 9th.

"My dear Stephen:

"Were the power to select my own heaven given me I would choose to be Stephen Mandrake's wife, to bear such children to him as Kate has borne to you, to live forever in a house hard by a river, to share winter with him and summer, to see the world die and be born anew, grass grow green, flowers bloom and fade, sun dance on the water; to hear murmur of wind in the trees, the forlorn cry of a bittern flying above the river; and in time to grow old and sit, a contented Joan to his Darby beside the hearth, among our children and their children. If there be truly many mansions in my Father's house, then I pray a small one be given Stephen, for large mansions are no place to nourish love or even contentment. Perhaps in too large a space love gets lost and is never found again. It is altogether fascinating to consider that I shall very soon know if there is truth in the Biblical promise.

"November 10th. Again the room as I saw it long ago has been superposed on this room, and as if looking into a clouded mirror I have seen the blue mantel painted in zodiacal designs, the couches and the brass-laden table between them, and heard the clocks as I once heard them ticking like angry swarming insects. This time Caroline did not lie in her dreadful upside-down fashion, but with a blackened tube in her lips, while Harry Phillips crouched beside her, moving his hands in ecstasy over her body, his slobbering lips following after, and so obscene was this thing that I turned my eyes away until it vanished. In a materialistic era when the Almighty God is thought to be merely a bogeyman, when souls are out of date, the hereafter subject for joke books, to declare those long dead frequent this room, and that a

man in his grave for more than fifty years in broad light of day sits at my hearth, smoking his pipe and fondling shadowy dogs at his feet, is beyond the ridiculous. Nevertheless such things are the truth, though why they should be I shall not know, so long as body and soul are one, nor shall I know why Caroline wages her unholy war unless, as I have hitherto set down, it is to drive those of Mandrake blood from Mandrake House and return it, desolate and drear, to the possession of damned souls for their cursed carnivals.

"November 21st. There are moments when I lose temper with Ellen, who, in her determination to keep me from distress, deprives me of much that would serve to enliven my not too lively life. For days on end she has gone about nervous and upset. No amount of questioning could make her tell her trouble; and only this morning did I succeed in getting it out of Peter. Surely life grows curiouser and curiouser. Not only am I dead, but my poor body has been found buried in land which long ago had been my father's farm, and I have altogether shocked Peter and Ellen by ribald laughter. To them it is no laughing matter that all inmates of Mandrake House are suspected of doing me to death. They are exceedingly apprehensive lest they be cast into jail themselves to languish there for the rest of their days, or even to be hanged by their respectable necks until dead.

"In vain I have pointed out that if worst comes to very worst I shall materialize in flesh and blood to confound their accusers; and while this would be embarrassing, better that than have Mandrake run afoul of the law. Stupidly Ellen has let Benjamin Froste have it out of her that her entrance into these United States is not legally all it should be. Benjamin is so honest I am quite sure he would be incapable of grasping how innocent Ellen was of intent to commit murder, or how necessary it was to give her a new name and personality.

"Peter is already an American citizen, but I have no means of finding out whether marriage to him would prevent Ellen's deportation. However, I shall order Ellen to marry him immediately, and if she persists in clinging to the hair shirt of her prison sentence as sound reason for not doing so, I shall dramatically tell her to choose between matrimony and me. But I shall also establish a second line of defense. Once the marriage is a *fait accompli*, I shall give Peter a letter to a certain someone in the British service and let Mr. Froste's conscience do its worst.

"*November 23rd.* Ellen has proved herself of such doughty character she has successfully flaunted an attempt to turn her aside from what she considers her bounden duty. Summoned to testify at the inquest on the dead woman, rather than permit me to be wholly alone during the absence of the household she prepared and swallowed a draft which so sickened her she was held excused.

"From Peter I have learned that the poor disinterred body was so decomposed identification was impossible, nor was its nondescript clothing helpful. I am most curious about the dead woman, but I am sure she is not Sarah Mandrake!

"My dear Stephen:

"On this, the last Thanksgiving I shall ever know this side of the Styx, I have indeed much to be thankful for. Even to this faraway room has come the good odor of food, of apple-log fire, the sound of your child's laughter, Kate's lilting British voice and your own halting step. Knowing I have done much to further the happiness and well-being of Stephen Mandrake's kin, I am content, and if on this night I must make my final bow to earth and see the curtain of my life descend, I would be willing enough. "

"Ellen, cowed by my stern manifesto, has at long last wed Peter and doubtless will spend the remainder of her life apologizing to him for her lowly station in life and prison record. I think she will be very much surprised when she comes to know it was by merest chance Peter himself escaped prison. At any rate, for the present she is safe from the conscience of Mr. Froste and possible deportation—or so I hope.

"This has been a day of perfect Thanksgiving weather, not too much sun, great rolling banks of white, low-hanging clouds and a brisk wind. Again I have watched Jacob raking leaves from the lawn and your happy little boy leaping into the mounds, scattering them far and wide a great deal faster than ever Jacob can get them together. It is the most comic thing in the world to see your young Stephen walking beside Jacob, holding to his hand, and very unconsciously imitating his game leg.

"You seem stronger, Stephen, and in a more wholesome state of health. Always I wonder if Caroline and her devilish cohorts trouble you, but there is little use asking Peter and Ellen. If they know of

for all I know your life in Mandrake House flows as serenely as a springtime river.

"December 1st. A most frightening thing has happened. As I have written, on my return to Mandrake the idiot Victor was the only person who discovered Klara Schultz under the trappings of Sarah Mandrake. Shortly after I came to live in the south addition he shambled toward me up Mandrake Lane and as I had altogether forgotten his existence the dirty old man, peering from under shaggy brows, stirred no memory within me. Not in the least understanding his uncouth gestures, I did not know whether the creature meant me good or ill. As I hurried toward Mandrake House, he kept pace with me in a curious shambling trot, repeating over and over vaguely familiar sounds and gesturing with eyes, hands and body. When Peter opened the door to me, in sheer fright I almost fell into his arms, while the witless thing capered after me into the hall. At length Peter was obliged to use force to remove him. From that day forward he was Peter's sworn enemy, and assailed him with a barrage of whatever missiles he could find.

"When I found who the poor old creature was, I sent Jacob to see what could be done for him. The idiot, living in the cellar of his mother's home with a drab having no more sense than he, wanted none of my good intentions. All the same, he would follow me whenever I set foot over the threshold. He became so annoying I was forced to complain to the authorities, who in time committed him to the county asylum. What became of the woman who shared his cellar I did not know, and until yesterday I gave neither of them a thought.

"By trial and error, sundry reflective devices, curtains and drapery Peter had made it quite impossible for anyone outside of the house to see inside this room. He saw to it also that the dormers presented the same dreary, unused appearance as those on the south addition. The possibility of discovering there was dwelling space under the rafters was practically nil. Nevertheless at daybreak yesterday a peculiar sound at the window nearest my bed awakened me. Stealthily I aroused Ellen. After listening for a moment she too was convinced someone was prowling about the tiles. She did not dare approach the window to make certain, nor did she dare call Peter on the phone, lest even a whisper be heard from without. With all quietness she

descended and told Peter of our fear. He went at once to the terrace and saw someone creeping from window to window on the roof of the north addition. He called to the man to descend and when he did not threatened to summon the state police. Like a veritable Quasimodo the person began a bombardment of plaster, tiles and whatever else he could lay hand to, then clambered down and vanished into Mandrake Wood.

"When Peter realized that it was the idiot who had been on the roof, he really did notify the state police. They made a futile search for him. Until he is again in custody I shall not feel secure, for I have a conviction that Hazeltine knows I am hidden here—though how in the world he discovered my hide-out I do not know. Peter tells me he escaped from the asylum within a few weeks after he had been locked up.

"January 31st.

"My dear Stephen:

"Surely the gods play tricks on stupid mortals. On the day I closed the door of life behind me I had little thought I would so long dwell in this room. Just a few short months I would linger and then Peter would carry me to the place where, eager-eared, I sat beside Stephen Mandrake, listening to his tales of gallant knights and fair ladies, of quest and tournament, of valor and love and beauty. And in that place secretly and with his own hands Peter would bury me. Now when life for me may be counted only by days, Mandrake earth is frozen too hard for grave-digging, and if I were to die tomorrow, the next day or a week hence, how Peter would carry out my orders is a problem much too intricate for me to solve. Poor Peter—I have bestowed many and heavy burdens on his too-willing shoulders!

"Since Christmas Eve I have not risen from my bed, and I shall never again rise from it. There are days when I am able to do no more than lie a poor stick while Ellen tends my wants and puts into my mouth the little food I am still able to swallow. Then again come blessed times when I have strength to sit propped against my pillows, read my books, listen to the radio or to Ellen's gossip, and drink the endless cups of tea which I still enjoy. This is one of the good days, Stephen. I know that there will be few enough of them and that I must hasten to complete what I have for your good and benefit attempted to set down.

"During Stephen's lifetime he saw to it that Mandrake's servants were always given a Christmas party. I had on my return re-established the custom, and I hope you will continue it so long as you live at Mandrake House. On the Christmas just past, convinced I was far too ill to bear the sound of gaiety, Ellen guilefully saw to it that the party would not be held in the attic space, but in the loft over the carriage barn. When she found I was very wishful to hear for the last time the echo of music and dancing feet, she waded through waist-high snow night after night while the house slept, and quenched the fire on which the loft must depend for warmth. And then when it was decided the loft had mysteriously become too cold to house the festivities, Ellen, with more cleverness than ever I gave her credit for, coaxed the party once again to the attic of the Mandrake House.

"On the day before Christmas, Peter drew my bed to the window, and I sat propped against the pillows, savoring the quiet winter world, seeing the tall sentinel birches heavy with drapery of snow, the fir trees looking for all the world like green and white inverted cornucopias standing in a prim row at the wood's edge, and great flocks of winter-bound birds quarreling and circling about the rendered suet fastened to the trees. From Mandrake Wood came my brother Jacob, drawing a hand sleigh piled high with green branches. Beside him trudged young Stephen, a red gnome in mittens, with eyes altogether hidden by an armful of greenery. Between house and wood I watched him fall and recover himself a dozen times with utmost good nature.

"A Christmas wreath hung on my own mantel. Pine boughs banked the marching elephants. On my bedside table was a tiny Christmas tree, and beneath were gifts I had bidden Ellen to choose secretly for Peter, and those I had bidden Peter choose secretly for Ellen. I chuckled a little sadly to think how very sentimental Sarah Mandrake the sophisticate, who long enough paid scant heed to Christmas, had grown, or perhaps it was that I had become senile. Wondering how many times I would see it rise, I sat watching a wan winter sun sink into the west, dusk spread like a soft blanket over river and hills, stars come shyly and reluctantly into the dark sky, watched until Peter came to draw my curtains, light my lamp and move my bed again into place, and Ellen to bring me food and the day's gossip. I knew you were to have a dinner party that night, Stephen, your first since coming to Mandrake House. I knew the names of your guests and

that Benjamin and his wife were sleeping in eerie Caroline's bed, and for this I had no envy.

"When Peter and Ellen had to leave me, I was content enough listening to carols on the radio, the same carols which little Klara Schultz—hands clasped over her thin midriff—sang earnestly to Stephen Mandrake one Christmas in the stone cottage. In time Ellen returned to give me the medicine which alone brings me sleep, to turn off lamp and radio and to bid me good night. At once I fell asleep, and then with a sense of impending disaster was wide-awake again. Though fire burned on the hearth and the electric filaments were ruddy with heat, still I shivered and shook as if in the tremors of death. When I reached for the phone to summon Ellen or Peter I saw the draperies on the window farthest from my bed billowing in an icy blast and in utter terror watched someone creeping from behind them. I dropped the phone, stretched a palsied hand to the light beside the bed and saw the idiot cavorting and gesturing. Endlessly he repeated the sound he had made on the day I met him in Mandrake Lane, the sound he had made every single time he came within my sight.

"It is awesome to consider the resources of the human body, and of the human spirit. I am slowly and at times painfully dying, yet when confronted with actual death, from unplumbed depths I garnered strength to fight for life, determination not to be deprived of it. For many months I had been unable to speak above a whisper and, except under utter necessity, for weeks I had not spoken at all, yet when it dawned on me what the idiot wanted, that the sounds he made were a dreadful attempt to sing a few remembered notes from the aria of *Trovatore* which fifty years before in the stone cottage had sent him in a shivering palsy of pleasure and that my choice lay between singing and dying, I sang it in a voice which must have echoed through Mandrake House. If it was painful to my poor throat, then I did not feel the pain.

"Few can fathom the murky depths of such twisted souls as Victor's. Perhaps the idiot himself did not understand his own rage when at first I did not sing for him, but his terrible hands grasped and shook me as a terrier shakes a rat. Why I did not die is another of the mysteries of that dreadful night. Where I gathered strength to slap the drooling mouth, double my hands into fists and beat at the thing mauling me, I do not know. But I did, and the idiot loosed me and, mewling

like a beaten animal, stood weeping and licking the tears from his dirty face with a slobbering red tongue. Then a flicker of humanity crept into his poor brain. He smoothed the bed coverings and tucked them closely about me. But the flicker fled quickly. Again the creature began his grotesque mimicry of a woman singing. He swayed his body, stretched out his hands, rolled horrible eyes and repeated over and over hoarse guttural sounds.

"When the filthy hands reached for me a second time, in sheer terror I tried to sing, and incredibly I *did* sing. The idiot, dropping beside my bed, yowled like a beast and writhed in witless ecstasy, while with terrible intensity I sang on and on, sang until Ellen came running from the passageway. With broken yellow teeth bared in an angry snarl, the shambling thing crept toward her, and I, slowly sinking into oblivion, thought surely it was the oblivion of death and that Ellen too must die."

Ellen stirred and murmured and I ceased my reading, awaiting what she had to tell. But tears halted her speech, and Peter asked permission to continue with the recital she had attempted. Clearing his throat he began.

"As Madam has written, sir, for a long time she had been almost incapable of speech, and when Ellen heard her singing she thought death power had given her something in the nature of the 'Swan Song' from *Lohengrin*. Perhaps you know, sir, that the Old Country teems with such tales, and Ellen is somewhat given to belief in them. At any rate, when she heard Madam, she arose so abruptly she overthrew the chair and, without waiting to right it, fair flew to open the portrait and get up to Madam. The mad fellow took her unawares, and, if I may say so, sir, did her in. When I arrived both she and Madam were senseless, and having the two to attend I'll quite give you my word, sir, I did not know which way to turn first."

For a moment he hesitated, then went on: "Knowing the fellow had already been on the roof perhaps I was a bit stupid not to have thought of Hazeltine, but until I saw the shattered window he never entered my head. I was quite certain the thing which barred us from entrance to Mandrake had done in Ellen and Madam."

"What do you mean something barred you from Mandrake?" asked Vanningham, turning to Peter. But Peter seemed altogether reluctant, and it was I who told Vanningham what had happened on Christmas

Eve. When I had done he peered at me in utter incredulity. "Hell!" he murmured. "Of all the tripe!" and lapsed into silence. I bade Peter to get on with his tale, and he continued:

"During the time I was striving with the door, sir, I kept cudgelling my brain for means to get into Mandrake. You see, similar things had happened to me before that time, and I believe I was not quite so excited as you were, sir. I knew the door between my pantry and the passageway was fastened, for directly I had closeted the silver at night I turned the key and left it in the lock. I really presume it was no more than habit, sir, and I believe Cook locked the kitchen door for the same reason. I first thought to have the key from her, unlock the passage door and by means of the rear kitchen door get outside the house and then, using my own keys, let myself into the north addition. But Cook was too confused to know what had become of her key-ring and I was much too hurried to await her searching it out. So, after leaving Cook in the attic passageway I descended, not quite knowing what I was to do, and then, thinking of the window at the head of the cellarage stair, hastened to it, opened the casement, booted glass from the weather window and was through in a trice.

"The blood you saw on my hands was from the glass. I hope you'll overlook my evasions concerning them, sir. I let myself into the north addition by way of the rear door, went directly to Madam and, as I have related, sir, found her in a bad way. Ellen had been battered about, but her pulse was not too ill, and my concern was less for her than for my mistress. Immediately I prepared and administered Madam's usual injection. When her colour brightened a bit, I gave Ellen a hypodermic also and covered her with a blanket, and I'll give you my word, sir, it was only then I became conscious of the shattered window and saw the draperies had been thrust aside.

"Lest it be discerned from outside, I turned out the light and, taking a torch from the table, shaded it with my palm and began looking about. There was no one in either the room or the passageway. I waited until my eyes were a bit more accustomed to the darkness; then I peered out at the tiles and so far as I could see there was no one there either. Drawing the draperies over the shattered window to fend off as much chill as possible, and to prevent further intrusion, I pushed the heavy chest against them and set about looking for the marauder. At the stairhead I leaned forwards and sent torchlight into the lower passage, and this also seemed to be altogether unoccupied.

I suppose I should have descended for closer scanning, but I was in a dreadful hurry, sir, and the possibility of the portrait's being left open did not occur to me.

"Thinking the person I sought might very well have slipped down the north-addition stair while I was in attendance on Madam and Ellen, I went quickly back the way I came, searched the north addition thoroughly and, coming upon no one, unlocked the door between the addition and the house proper, I believe with some notion of seeing to the children, sir, but I really do not recall if I had a plan in mind at all or knew what I was to do next. At any rate, I began hasty ascent of the main stairway and midway heard a woman cry out, and immediately afterwards a door close rather violently. I was quite sure it was the door to the Caroline suite, sir, and accelerating my speed I threw it open and entered. There was no light at all in the room, sir, and for a bit I stood quite still, peering about, and shortly saw the portrait was ajar and thought there was movement in the passageway beyond.

"I went in, sir, and had I come upon the devil himself I'd have had a go at him, that wrathful I was. When I sought to draw the torch from my pocket I found I had either dropped it or left it behind me. So, feeling along the wall I went forwards and up the stair and there at the very threshold of Madam's door saw someone flattened against the wall."

Peter paused, and then went sturdily on: "I'm afraid I killed the fellow, sir. I didn't know I was killing him, or perhaps I did. At any rate, when I got my hands on him I battered him about until he went limp on me.

"I left him and went again to Madam. Her colour was doing splendidly, sir, and I gave her a second injection. But when I looked over Ellen, I realized she was very much in need of more medical attention than I was able to bestow, and that quickly. I bore her down the stair, and listening in the passageway heard rummaging about belowstairs, but the Caroline suite was as quiet as the grave. So I opened the aperture and, laying her on the bed, tossed the cover over her, intending as quickly as may be to discover her myself. But there were other matters which must be attended to immediately.

"I closed the portrait behind me and went quickly to have a look at the chap I'd done in. When I saw it was the Hazeltine person and that he was dead, I made up my mind to get him outside of Mandrake

House as speedily as ever I could, for I wanted neither to have a dead body lying about, nor risk Madam being discovered. I dragged the fellow into Madam's room, removed the chest from the window and tossed the body out on the roof. I hoped the tiles were too icy to retain trace of entrance or exit, that the slope was steep enough to speed the body into the snow beneath, and that the snow was of such depth as to cover it until I could better dispose of it.

"I can't say, sir, that doing in Hazeltine gave as much concern as the shattered window. The chill was not beneficial to Madam, and with daylight the broken panes would surely be discerned from outside. It may seem a bit incredible, sir, but in a sparse quarter-hour I had crept over the attic beams to the really false dormer on the east side of the addition, removed the casements and borne them to Madam's room and there rehung them. What I should have done had the frames not been of exact size I'm sure I do not know, sir. Fortunately in arranging the room for Madam I had placed the weather window on the inside, so it gave no trouble at all.

"When I'd dealt with the casements, I gave Madam her third injection and then, descending to listen inside the portrait, heard the hue and cry raised for Ellen and myself still going on. I was somewhat annoyed to find Ellen had not been come upon, but at the moment there was nothing I could do about her, for I must immediately deal with the vacancy left in the east dormer. I went again to Madam's room and carried the casements into the passage quickly, removed the shattered glass and then crept over the beams to rehang them, praying the vacant panes would not be visible from below.

"Returning to Madam I found her still senseless, and I do believe, sir, I was never more unhappy in my life than when I had to leave her among the shambles, badly needing me and all unconscious. I closed the door, went down the stair into the north addition, drew the panel after me and prepared to dispose of Hazeltine.

"On going into the cellarage of the north addition and finding I could not stand upright, I crept on hands and knees to the window, unlatched it and returned to the stair in the same manner—and very tiring I found it, sir. I let myself out of the front of the addition and quickly thrust the body through the window. Lest it had left an indentation or perhaps a bit of blood, I kicked the snow about and, as well as I hurriedly could, obliterated whatever marks there might be. Then I entered by way of the front door, descended a

second time, got the body across my back, bore it to a dark corner and covered it with the debris lying about.

"After leaving the cellarage I hastily dealt with my dirty clothing and cleaned myself as well as I hastily could. Then I sought undiscovered to get into the house proper. But I had not counted on the constables being about, sir. The front portion of Mandrake was under guard, the rear also, and from behind both the door leading from the north addition and the portrait, I heard people moving in the house and knew it was no use trying to enter by either route. Thinking of the window by which I had left the passageway, I watched until the coast was clear and entered, but no sooner had I nipped through when, if I may use such an expression, sir, you upset the apple cart by chancing upon me at the stairhead and demanding to know where I had been. I was much too worn to think of a reasonable explanation, sir. I had hoped to gain the pantry and have a stimulant to help me think a bit, and you disconcerted me very much, sir, when you bolted out and laid hold of me."

"I didn't know who you were, Peter, and certainly I did not know you came through the window. I thought you had come up the cellar stair."

"That was what I wished to convey, sir. When you insisted on going with me to the north addition I really did not know what to do. I was most anxious about Ellen. I even tried to give you a hint, sir."

"Did you, Peter? I don't exactly remember."

"I expect not, sir. At any rate I sat on the couch wondering how I could go about returning to the house proper and, so to speak, find Ellen. I'm ashamed to say, sir, I fell asleep. I did not mean to but I was really done in, if I may say so, sir."

"I know you were, Peter, but we found Ellen all right, and our troubles are over. You were very loyal, Peter, and very, very diligent in all our interests. I'm grateful."

"Thank you, sir," said Peter, and said no more, and I went back to the pages lying before me.

"February 18th. Tonight the sun has set in a red blaze of glory. As far as eye could see the snow was almost blood-red. I know I shall not see it rise, for not only is Stephen in this room, but patient dark death who has so long awaited my pleasure is here as well. I am not

afraid to die, for I am sure Almighty God will forgive ancient Sarah Mandrake the trespasses committed by young Klara Schultz, that He will have mercy on my poor soul and the soul of Stephen Mandrake, and permit us to be together through all eternity, and grant peace and happiness to those who dwell under Mandrake roof. Amen. Good-by, my dear Stephen, and God bless you!

“SARAH MANDRAKE.”



CHAPTER TWENTY

I HELD the pages on my knee and for a little the room was very still. Looking upon the brave young Stephen who smiled down from the wall, I, too, prayed Almighty God to permit him to dwell with his love throughout eternity.

Vanningham first moved, first spoke, walked restlessly about the room. He at last came to stand beside the hearth and say plaintively and most resentfully, "At my age it's damned upsetting to be forced into believing in such thing as eternal love. Until tonight, more or less I believed love was merely a nice name for man's biological urge to reproduce his species. What do you think about this business of love and life after death, Steve?"

But before I discussed love or life in any form there were a number of things I wished set right. Turning to Peter I asked if it was he who helped Kate through the window, and he answered he had not.

For a second time Vanningham spoke. "I had a little play at that Christmas Eve game myself," he said. "If you remember, Steve, Prue and I were the last of your dinner party to get under way, and the other cars had reached the highway before we came to the turn of Mandrake Lane. Just beyond it our lights picked up a pair of eyes blinking and glaring as animal eyes do when lights are suddenly focussed on them. In fact I thought at first it was a cat or a coon treed on one of the lower branches of the oaks, but when I sounded the horn a guy went crashing into the bushes and somehow he stuck in my mind and bothered me all the way home. I was just about ready for bed when it dawned on me the guy might be Victor Hazeltine, and I didn't like it a bit. In the weeks he'd been in the crazy-house I'd seen him a couple of times and it seemed to me he was

getting loonier by the minute. He didn't have any kind of use for Peter and though he was a pretty old man he was as strong as an ox. On the day he got clear of the asylum he damn near killed two of the guards. So it didn't look so good for Peter if Hazeltine was hanging around Mandrake.

"I got dressed again and started back here. Thought I'd take a look-see and if I found Hazeltine, try to coax him into the automobile. He was hell on automobiles and tickled pink if anyone gave him a ride. Even the day they carted him off to the asylum he was happy as the devil because he was going for a ride in a nice big car. Well, I stepped on the gas and got here in a hurry, put the car in under the trees at the back of the house and began to poke around and see what I could see. All of a sudden hell broke loose inside, and I started on a run for the front door, but before I got there I began to wonder if I wouldn't sound a mite queer explaining how-come I was at Mandrake when I'd started for home a couple of hours back.

"I headed toward the car, and just as I got to the corner I saw glass shower out of a window, and before I got my breath a guy came out fast and took off around the north addition. I stood there scratching my head, wondering what the hell went on, when another guy began climbing out. When I'd edged closer, I smelled perfume, and right away heard something tear. I figured a woman was caught on the window. So I kind of snuck up and limbered her down and, by golly, as soon as her feet touched ground she took off like a bat out of hell around the *south* addition. It was pretty dark but you know when you stand around without any light you kind of get cat-eyed, and I didn't have any trouble at all seeing who were the next batch of folks to come climbing out. I made up my mind it would be a smart thing to go right on home and tend to my knitting, but I'll be damned if I could make myself do it.

"I kept close to the house, followed the gang and saw someone boosted through the south window and the rest start for the front of the house. I kept right after them, and when Jake opened the door and let them in I began to wonder if everybody wasn't tight maybe and playing some fool game. You know, like treasure hunt and so on. For a while I stood watching the house, and when lights began to go on, feeling pretty foolish I started off to get back to the car. I'll be damned if after I had passed the north addition, something didn't make the most God-awful bump just behind me, and

I'll bet I jumped a yard high. Didn't know whether to head for the car fast or go back to see what bumped. I'm just the sort of fool to go back, and I did and began to feel around in the snow with my feet. Pretty soon I kicked something, and after I leaned over and touched it I got a real shock. I've been in this medical business too long not to know a cadaver when I lay hands on it, and sure as shooting a cadaver lay in the snow outside Mandrake House. I didn't want any part of it. This time I did make the car and, just as someone came sneaking out of the north addition, headed toward Scarletville. I didn't know who it was and I certainly didn't want to know. I kept right on going.

"I went in and mixed me a drink and about halfway down the glass heard the state-police car go zipping by. I was so damn sure I'd be sent for I didn't even take off my overshoes. I'd just about finished another drink when the hospital called up and said they were sending the ambulance for me. When I got here I was dumbfounded to find it was Kate I was supposed to fix up. Kate didn't have any need for an ambulance, but I told them to stick around anyway. Had a hunch somebody else was going to need it, and sure enough they did. While they were loading Ellen up I went out and began flashing a torch around careless-like, and as far as I could see there wasn't any damn corpse where I thought it would be. No blood either—no nothing but considerable messed-up snow. If I'd been tight that might account for seeing a corpse where there wasn't any corpse, but I was cold sober.

"So what? Well, when Froste stumbled over the guy in Mandrake Wood I had a pretty good notion where it came from. What bothered me was how it got there so quick. Pretty soon I had it figured out that the cadaver was Hazeltine, though he didn't have much face left. He'd swopped the asylum duds for some that looked as if they might have come off a scarecrow, only these damn scientific farmers around Dutchess County don't have scarecrows any more. Did you mess his face up purposely, Peter?"

"I battered him about a bit, sir, one way and another, but I really could not say what happened to his face."

"I can," said Jacob. "Dogs."

Vanningham grunted and went on: "I was pretty sure someone at Mandrake had bumped off Hazeltine, accidental or because he was asking for it, but at that the guy was a damn sight better off

dead than living. So I kept what I knew and what I thought I knew strictly under my hat and threw my weight around to get him tucked under the daisies without being identified. And now that we've all taken our hair down I don't mind telling that the dame the dogs uncovered was Hazeltine's girl friend."

"How do you know she was?" asked Jacob suspiciously.

"Deduction, Mr. Holmes, deduction," chuckled Vanningham, but added ruefully, "I couldn't deduce why he killed the gal, why he didn't light out afterward, or where he hid while the law was nosing around. He'd been in the asylum only a couple of weeks when he busted out. To me it looks as if he made his way back to the gal, bumped her off because the moon was full or something, then hid out until he got bumped off himself. He must have been hanging around a good three months. It's a wonder someone didn't see him—or maybe he went away and came back again. I had some of the angles figured out O.K., but where I made my big mistake was I never thought Peter was in on the play. I was sure it was Jake here who was the killer. Jake's got a right nasty temper when he's riled—just as liable to kill a guy as not."

Jacob spat into the fire. "Think yer smart, don'cha, Doc? Well, I didn't have to do no deducin' to figger who the female was. The corpsy dee-lic-tie, as they call it, didn't have but three fingers on her left hand. That's all Hazeltine's woman had, see? Another thing yer deducin' didn't do so good at. I'll bet a thousand folks knew she never did leave the cellar after Hazeltine was carted off. She wasn't doing no harm to no one. Lotsa people gave her handouts. I did, an' I could name lotsa others. Butch Clifton let her have his knife for something or other; he never did get it back. I expect when the boy friend showed up he grabbed it off'n her. That's how come it was in his pocket."

"Why didn't Clifton tell the constables about the knife?" I asked.

"Why should he?" questioned Jacob reasonably. "They draw their pay f'r findin' out things, don't they? Hazeltine got back here around first of October. I never did see him, but 'bout that time I began noticin' rabbit traps all set. Never knowed anyone to set traps like he did, so I figgered he was back."

"You didn't think the authorities should be notified?" I suggested.

"'Twarn't none of my business. I don't figger on gittin' mixed up with the law any more than I hafta. Dumb lot anyways you take 'em.

Lookit Glock now and this-here doctor." He jerked his thumb in Vanningham's direction. "When they found that-there corpse there was dozens of things yellin' out loud who it was but they was too dumb to take notice of 'em."

"Oh yeah?" quipped Vanningham. "What for instance, smart guy?"

"Hazeltime had a pinhead kinda like this fella in the circus, Zip-the-what-is-it. If you'd run yer hand down under his whiskers and hair you'd've felt it. Wasn't 'nother head in Dutchess County shaped that-a-way, n'r feet either. Goin' barefoot gives folks' feet different shape. Hazeltime never did wear shoes winter n'r summer. All you hadda do, Doc, was take a gander at his feet an' you'd know the stiff never wore no shoes neither. Put two and two together an' you'd've got the answer all right."

"Well, well, Dr. Watson," said Vanningham, "you didn't get around to figuring maybe I didn't want to know who the corpsy dee-lic-tie was, did you?" He grinned and lapsed into silence, and Jacob also held his whist.

Then I asked Peter how he rid himself of Hazeltime's body.

"The tale's a bit gruesome, sir," he answered. "If you remember, sir, it was on the twenty-seventh you and Miss Rosemary followed Mrs. Mandrake and the children. Towards daylight of that night I disposed of the body. It was not difficult. As you know, sir, the cellarage of the north addition is extremely cold. The corpse was well frozen. So I simply took it on my shoulder, bore it to Mandrake Wood, and at the first likely place I came to tossed it off. 'I meant to return shortly and thrust it through a convenient hole in the ice, or make a hole if I couldn't come upon one, sir. At first I was so concerned with Madam's condition, and after your return—if I may mention such a thing, sir—with your odd manner towards me, that—I quite give you my word, sir—I forgot about the body. Unfortunately before I remembered it Mr. Froste trod upon it."

"Very unfortunately," said Mr. Froste dryly. "I'm a little allergic to dead bodies, and I don't mind telling you I was never so frightened in my life. If ever you toss off another cadaver, Peter, I wish you'd let me know the location ahead of time."

"I trust I shall never do such a thing again, sir, but if I must, I assure you I'll do as you request, sir," said Peter politely.

Vanningham turned towards Benjamin Froste. "Suppose you

shed the light of a trained mind on this business, Froste. Let's hear what you have to say about it."

"A while back you said that at your age you resented being forced into believing in eternal love. Well, something like that goes for me too. At my age I resent being forced into abandoning my belief that when a man dies he's dead, and that's the end of him. I'd like to say that never in my fairly long legal experience has what you kindly refer to as my 'trained mind' been made to consider spectres as participants in possible murders and very possible grand larceny. And I most fervently hope I'll never again be made to consider them so. You've had close contact with Mandrake spooks, Steve. Tell us what you make of them?"

"I may theorize no end and that is all I may do, all anyone may do. However, certain salient facts are stable enough, and from these can be pieced together a logical fabric. We know Stephen Mandrake all unwittingly wedded a woman who was immoral, possibly degenerate; that she brazenly brought her lover to live under her husband's roof; that in time apparently Stephen got the wind up and in hurt dismay thereafter kept far out of Caroline's path by having the suite of rooms built for his lone occupancy at the rear of Mandrake House.

"It well might be at this time small Klara Schultz stumbled into his life and served as an outlet for Stephen's pent-up emotions, but it would seem that even his very patent affection for the child failed to keep him stable when another unwholesome facet of his wife's character came to light."

"What unwholesome facet?" asked Froste.

"I don't know," I said. "Remember I'm only theorizing."

"Do you think Stephen found out about the attic room?"

"Maybe so. But there is no mention of such thing among his papers, nor did Madam Mandrake write of telling him."

"She wrote that Caroline was a hop-head, didn't she?"

"If you mean she smoked opium, she may have. An opium pipe somewhat resembles a tube, so perhaps your surmise is logical."

Vanningham muttered to himself, then said abruptly, "This isn't relevant, of course, but I so seldom get a bright idea that when I do I have to speak right up. You know, Steve, you hear so damn much about the sins of the present generation it plumb shocks a guy to remember other generations had any sins. My grandpa was a doc,

too, and the case histories he left behind are the same sort of thing doctors are now wrestling with every day of their lives. Maybe the names are prettied up a little, but when you get right down to cases it's the same old trying to sneak away from what church folks call conscience. Likker, sex, hop, delirium tremens, abortions and the whimwhams—they were right prevalent in grandpa's day. They're right prevalent now. I bet between Albany and New York I could put the finger on a dozen dames so much like Caroline you'd be surprised. . . . Say, what started me off like this anyway? Go on, Steve."

"We know Stephen absented himself from Mandrake for a good many years, and I shouldn't wonder if he did a bit of thinking during that time, maybe even accepted the European viewpoint that he wasn't disgraced for life because his wife had presented him with a tidy pair of horns. Perhaps he returned to Mandrake with determination to make an end to the affair between Harry and Caroline, even to toss them neck and crop out of Mandrake House, but the thing he had not expected to do he apparently did. It's all too feasible to suppose, having loved the child Klara and finding her grown into a luscious young woman, he found his innocent affection for her blossoming into the passion of a lover and the boundless devotion mature men are wont to bestow on sweethearts vastly younger than themselves.

"Of course all of this is conjecture of the first water, but I would say, Stephen being an honest person all unversed in intrigue, Caroline very soon discovered he had turned to an unspoiled girl for affection. It must indeed have been bitter for one whose attractions had passed tidemark to know a woman half her age, with twice her beauty, was walking off with the hitherto despised husband—and undoubtedly his fortune as well. I firmly believe Caroline murdered Stephen rather than permit him to divorce her and marry her young rival, but how she accomplished it I do not know, for there is not a jot of evidence that Stephen met death by foul means."

"What about a death certificate?" asked Froste. "Wouldn't that state the reason of Stephen's death?"

Vanningham laughed. "In my grandpa's time they didn't pay much attention to such a thing," he said. "Anyhow, if the old medicine men had any doubts about cause of death in guys over thirty years old, dollars to doughnuts they just wrote 'general paresis,' and

let it go at that. Go on, Steve, your theorizing is right elegant."

"With Stephen dead, to her chagrin Caroline finds she has been given only her dower rights in his fortune and limited occupancy in his house. No doubt she is chary of beginning legal procedure for a greater share lest Stephen's reason for leaving her so meagre a legacy come to light. As a legatee she knows the terms of the trust created for Klara, and this becomes her forlorn hope. Having told Herman Schultz of his daughter's sinfulness, Caroline truly believes the father killed Klara as per village gossip, and with the knowledge that Klara is dead, Caroline, with what patience she can muster, settles herself to wait until the trust is dissolved.

"She then has the very trying experience of finding not only is the girl Stephen loved alive, but so to speak has the world by the bloody tail. Needs must she capitulate and see Klara trip off with a fortune because Caroline is afraid lest, along with her knowledge of the hidden chamber, Klara knows a thing or two about Stephen's untimely death. It's quite easy to understand why Caroline becomes obsessed by determination to destroy anything and everything which was cherished by Stephen, and which also recalls her own various and many failures. So what the frustrated woman may destroy she quite frenziedly destroys; what she may obliterate she just as frenziedly obliterate. I expect psychiatrists would conclude that when Caroline changed the name of Mandrake to 'Riverhaven' she was subconsciously seeking to return to the innocence of an era when 'Riverhaven,' her father's house, was her home.

"I do not believe personalities change after death. In the main Stephen Mandrake was an honest man. His virtues endured, and being of affectionate character he retains this trait also and carries beyond life the image of the girl Klara whom he loved. Caroline, on the other hand, is both dishonest and vindictive, her lover the rather senseless tail to her kite, and neither Harry nor Caroline changed characters after their passing.

"When Klara is doomed to death, I think it very possible that Stephen projects his image into her subconscious, and she seems to behold the two most important things which have ever come into her life—Stephen Mandrake and Mandrake House. She may not return to Stephen, for Stephen is dead, so she chooses the next best thing. She goes again to Mandrake, and the row over her begins anew. With might and main Caroline seeks to drive her from Man-

drake House, and just as valiantly Stephen strives to keep her there. You see, it's the deathless battle between forces of evil."

Very surprisingly Peter said, "I know, sir, like Jesus and Judas Iscariot."

And Froste added, "Or Saint George and the Dragon."

Vanningham chuckled. "I'm an educated guy, too. My money is on Little Red Ridinghood and the big ol' bad Wolf."

I waited a bit for further comment, but there was none, and I began again, vastly interested in my own yarning.

"Not only does Klara refuse to be frightened away from Mandrake but in a sense ignores Caroline's didos, sets about restoring the many things Caroline had been at such pains to destroy, arranges for a scion of the Mandrake family to inherit after Klara herself has gone to her reward, and as final insult takes over Caroline's very own secret chamber, sets up decent housekeeping and altogether makes Mandrake into such place as a self-respecting ghost would refuse to have anything to do with. No wonder the old girl gets mad as a hatter and puts on a great show.

"Her last chance is to frighten my family out of their very boots, and she doesn't bring that off either because Stephen balks her at every turn. In fact, Caroline fails in everything she attempts and the only thing she succeeds in doing is a thing that she didn't set out to do at all—make somewhat of a drunkard out of my witless self."

Vanningham chuckled. "Don't blame it on Caroline," he said. "You just have a natural aptitude toward liquor. Me, too. If I didn't have this damn profession hanging around my neck I'd never go sober to bed. Maybe I wouldn't get up sober, either. Which reminds me." He reached a long arm towards the decanter and poured himself a generous tot, and I did likewise, and Froste and Jacob also. Peter's eyes turned longingly towards decanter and glass, but a glance from Ellen settled him resignedly in his chair. While we sipped our potions the room was quiet and very friendly, and then Froste broke the silence by saying meditatively, "I wonder just what happened to Tia Singhe?"

I answered, "Undoubtedly Caroline happened to him, as she happened to Danny Dachshund and gallant little Mo; as she happened to the horses and Jacob's dogs." I motioned to the golden spaniels coiled at his feet. "They are not afraid of Mandrake House now, are they? They know Caroline has forever gone from it. So

do the horses. Since that last night they stand as contentedly in the driveway as ever they did in their stalls. A few days ago Kate's hunter broke from his loose box and began kicking up his heels on the lawn. No power on earth could get him so near to the house six weeks ago. But I'm afraid unless we find Tia Singhe we are never to know what happened to him."

"What about Christmas Eve?" asked Vanningham. "What percentage of the trouble did the idiot cause, and what percentage could the spooks take credit for?"

"About fifty-fifty. I'd say Caroline was altogether responsible for the business of the mid-corridor door. Nevertheless the idiot had wit of a sort. It would not be too much to suppose he realized by what road Ellen came. Having done her in he might very well have descended, by way of the suite got into the corridor, and while we were excitedly milling about crossed to the far side and, stealing up behind the door, slammed and bolted it. He must have been as agile as a monkey, you know. As I say, it is entirely feasible, but somehow I do not believe he had anything to do with the door."

"May I ask what you *do* think occurred on that night, sir?" said Peter.

"I'd rather have your version, Peter," I answered, and Peter, first hemming apologetically, said:

"As I've mentioned, sir, on many occasions I'd been hindered from entering or leaving a room when the door stood quite open. I'd come to believe it was rather a naughty trick of the spectres and not intended to be especially harmful. On the occasions I've mentioned invariably I was carrying some hefty object, and it was most annoying either to return from whence I came to relieve myself of the object or to await the spectre's pleasure. If I may say so, sir, it put me out greatly to stand with a tray, knowing very well the tea was going off cold while something you could not lay eye on chuckled in your ear. I remember on one occasion you ordered tea served on the terrace, sir, and it was necessary to wet down three pots before I was permitted to go through the door. If I may mention such a thing, sir, you were perplexed and I believe a bit annoyed when I continually appeared and disappeared. In fact you were quite profane, sir," said Peter somewhat indignantly.

"I'm sorry, Peter. Why didn't you tell me what was the trouble?"

"You see, sir, I considered it wise to maintain calm demeanour

and thus prevent the spectres from ascertaining the extent of my annoyance lest they keep everlastingly at the thing, sir. But if I may continue, sir, I'd like to say I've done a bit of chat with Ellen and we've decided it was the spectral person whom you refer to as 'Caroline' that incited the mad fellow to molest Madam Mandrake. She'd tried out everything else possible, sir. When she did not bring anything off, she put it into the chap's mind that Madam was hidden under the roof and in time sent him to do her in; and in that way Madam's hiding place would be discovered and Ellen and myself involved. She didn't much fancy Ellen and me, sir. Perhaps what I've said may sound a bit farfetched but I'm given to understand spectres are prone to consort with witless persons."

Vanningham winked a licentious eye. "I wonder if Hazeltine did his girl friend in because she complained of his affair with Caroline," he murmured. I would have liked to guffaw, but still more did I want to hear what Peter had to say.

"We think, sir, Ellen and myself, that when the Caroline spectre made sure the mad fellow was engaged with Madam, she saw to it, lest we go to her assistance, that we were barred from the house proper. We are both convinced, sir, on that night Caroline intended harm to young Mr. Stephen and Miss Sarah, knowing full well that if aught ill came to them you would forsake Mandrake House forever. We consider that the spectre known as 'Stephen' fended her off from the children and very possibly from lending a hand to the mad fellow also. We are quite sure when Madam and Ellen had been done in, the Hazeltine person descended and, entering by the portrait, got into the corridor and came upon Mrs. Ellers-Mandrake; but before he was able to do her a really bad mischief, he heard me ascending and made off the way he had come. As I said before, sir, it was a great bit more like killing a wild beast than a man, and aside from causing inconvenience to Mr. Froste and to the family, sir, I have no regrets."

Froste, taking a hand from his pocket, reached it towards Peter. "No hard feeling, Peter," he said. "But the next time you bump anyone off see it's the doctor or your boss who falls over him, will you?"

"I'll see if it can be arranged, sir," said Peter, with what very well might have passed for a twinkle.

Then he subsided while Vanningham, turning to Ellen, said; "Will you answer a question, Ellen?"

"Why, yes, sir," said Ellen.

"What did you swallow on the morning of the first inquest?"

Ellen closed her eyes and gave a long, shuddering sigh. "I can't altogether recall what was in the draught, sir," she said. "Quite everything I could lay hand on, but I'm sure it was the floor varnish which made me ill."

"The *what*?"

Again Ellen sighed. "Floor varnish, sir—the sort which requires no burnishing. The taste was really quite dreadful, sir."

"Good God!" said Vanningham in obvious admiration. "Greater love hath no man than he who will drink floor varnish—the non-burnishing kind—for his friend."

I also had a question for Ellen. I asked what had really happened on the evening she had returned from the hospital, and Ellen primly answered: "On the morning you came with Mr. Froste you made mention that everyone at Mandrake must attend the inquest, sir. When I realized Madam would be quite alone in the house I went into a great pet until Dr. Vanningham consented to my release from the hospital."

Vanningham snorted. "I'd consider that a masterpiece of understatement, Ellen. What you mean is you raised bloody hell with all and sundry until I brought you to Mandrake."

"Perhaps I do, sir. At any rate there was no one at all about when I let myself into the north addition. I went up to Madam at once and very glad she was to see me, sir, I'm sure. After we'd chatted a bit and I'd brewed Madam her tea I let myself through the portrait for a look about, as you might say, sir. Until they set up a great shouting and a charging up the main stairway I really was unaware the constables were in the house. Before they could come upon me I slipped back through the portrait and closed it after me. But I'm afraid the second and third time I opened the portrait was a mischief, sir. Since my incarceration in the Old Country I'd never much fancied the constabulary, sir, and they'd been more than a bit trying while I was in the hospital at Van Etten, so perhaps I was giving them a bit of their own, sir. Such a great to-do they made, stamping about and shouting. It was really quite comical and I'm afraid I somewhat enjoyed the commotion, sir."

Vanningham laughed. "I'll bet you did," he said. "Ellen, you are a proper caution and after this I'm going to make pretty damn certain you are on my side."

"I'll be honoured to be on your side, I'm sure, sir," said Ellen. Turning to me she asked my permission to depart, but Froste laid a restraining hand on her arm. "Tell me, Ellen," he said, "why both you and Peter insisted Madam Mandrake had given her jewels to me."

For a moment Ellen fidgeted unhappily, then answered, "I'm sorry we caused you discomfort, sir. After a fashion we told the truth. Madam did intend turning them over to you for safety's sake, and more than once when we visited New York she had Peter carry the jewels with us for that purpose. But always she changed her mind, sir. She loved the jewels and couldn't bear parting with them."

Peter, hemming politely, then asked, "May I also offer my apology, sir? You see, in order to keep Madam's secret it was necessary to be constantly alert. But your discovery of the existence of the jewels caught me off guard as you might say, and there was nothing to do but divert attention from ourselves by implying that you were cognizant of their whereabouts. I hope you will overlook the artifice, sir."

Froste grinned sheepishly. "You certainly turned tables on me," he said, "and there is nothing a lawyer hates more than to be outfoxed, but I'll forgive you this time, Peter."

"Thank you, sir," said Peter, bestowing his most elegant bow. Ellen standing primly beside Peter made her *devoirs* and then went with him towards the door. But at the threshold Peter halted and facing the room delivered his valedictory:

"May I say, sir, I'm exceedingly rejoiced we are not to be troubled further by spectres and so on? It was most tiring, sir; it was indeed."

And I answered that it *had* been tiring, and I, too, was rejoiced that Mandrake was at peace. With somewhat moist eye I watched the incredible pair as they went sedately towards the north addition.

With head resting against the mantel frame, Jacob Zachariah noisily slumbered on his hassock beside the hearth. Vanningham, pointing a thick thumb in his direction, said, "Let's wake him up and get him tight. He's funnier'n hell when he's liquored." Reaching for the decanter he added, "Now that Mandrake's damn ghosts have been laid and everything is sweetness and light, how's for making a night of it?"

And we awoke Jacob and did.



EPILOGUE

THE long windows of this pleasant room stand wide to summer sun which burnishes Kate's bright hair and patterns the table as I write. Within my sight Miss Sarah toddles over fragrant grass, holding to the hand of her beloved Ellen Meadows. From the river below the cliffs come sound and fury of young Stephen splashing as he swims under tutelage of Rosemary York, and within Mandrake House with dignity and decorum Peter Petralsky moves about his duties. In her fine stone cottage at the end of the lane, Mistress Dottie attends the lares and penates bestowed by her fatuous bridegroom, Jacob Zachariah Schultz, while Jacob Zachariah himself dots-and-carries on some special and self-elected task within confines of Mandrake land. Beside me sits my wife, born Kate Ferguson, who with hands folded in her lap lazily does nothing at all.

These eight persons are my family, my tried and true comrades, and when autumn comes again two more will be added to the number, for at such season Kate will again give birth and Helen Tempest will return to care for mother and babe. In time, *deo volente*, Kate will bear other children, and in time also our children's children will dwell in Mandrake House. It is for them and the generations who will come after them that I have made shift to set into honest words the incredible tale of this incredible house. As God is my judge I swear what I have written to be altogether the truth, let skeptics jeer as they will.

STEPHEN ELLERS-MANDRAKE

*Written at Mandrake House
in Van Etten Township,
Dutchess County,
New York State.
July 27, 1944.*

portion of old
Schultz Farm
house and remainder
of farm on other
side of the road

Small

Trees and Bushes

Kennels

Stable

Dec

Stable
Yard

Grassy
Slope

Wickorake
Wood

Longwood to Hickory

Dec
House
Trunk

Shed

Grassy
Slope

Grassy
Slope

Slope
↓

PROPERTY OF UNIVERSITY
OF WASHINGTON LIBRARIES
GRADUATE READING ROOM
NON-CIRCULATING

Foot
path
↑

Circling Drive
Stile
↓

Farm
Land

Arrage
House

High Land

Sloping
Land
↑

Lawn

Lawn

Manor
House

North Addition

South Addition

Gate

to Van Etten
↑

Formal Garden

Formal Garden

Lawn

Lawn

Wood

Gate

Stable

Retreat

Heart

Star

Heart

Star

Heart

Triangle

Triangle

Triangle

Circle

Star

Circle

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